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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

JULY 1985
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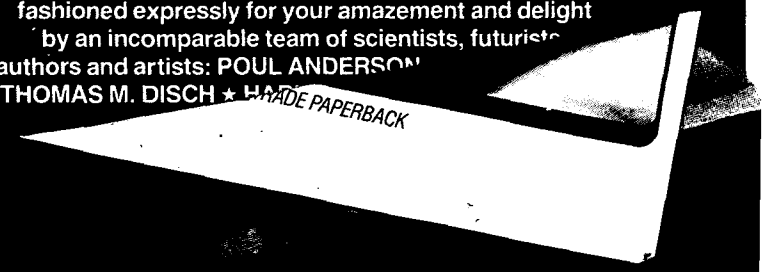

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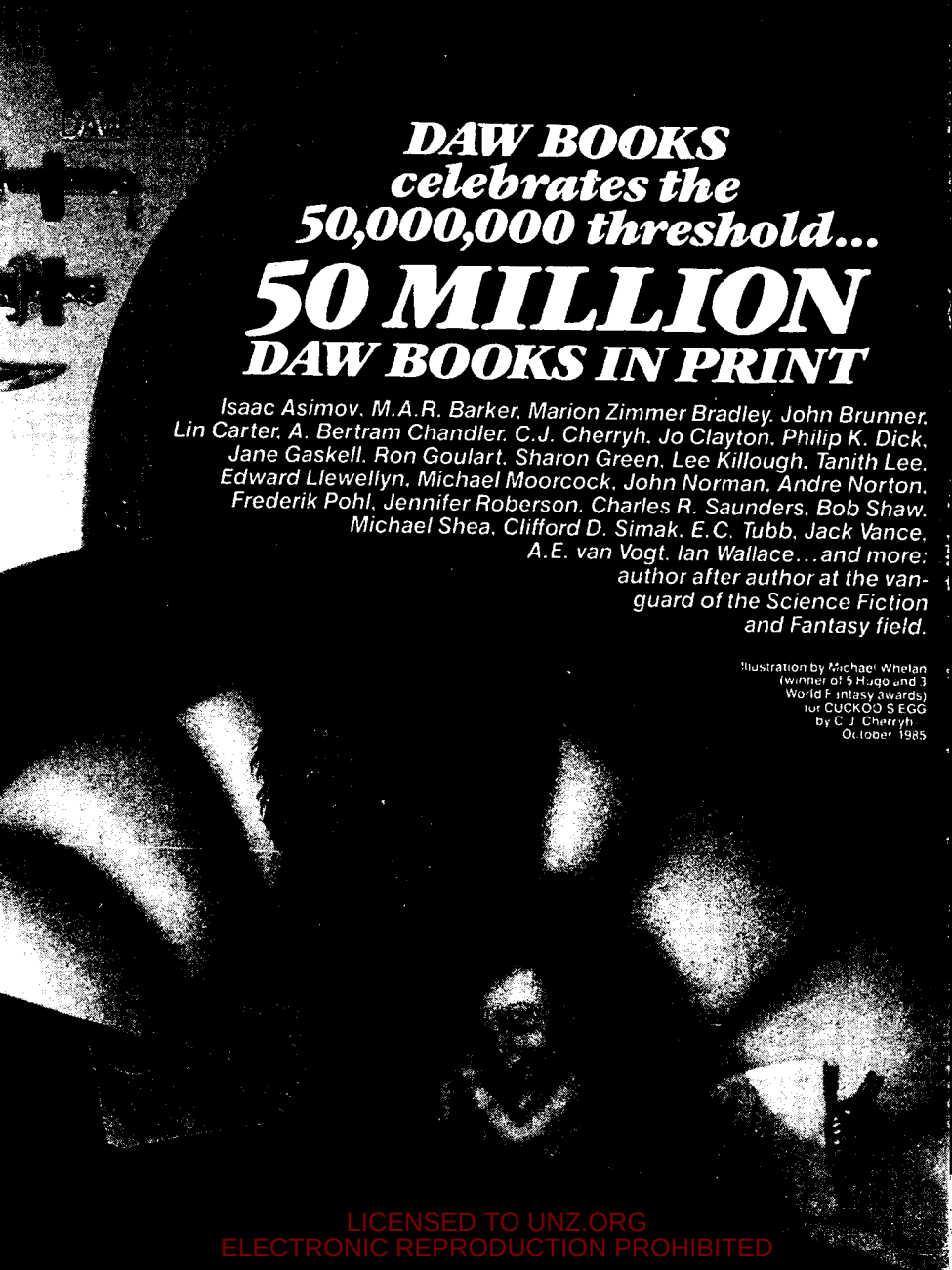

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EDITORIAL

SUPERSTUPIDITY

by Isaac Asimov

Some months ago, a reader sent us a sulfurous letter, one that charred the paper it was typed on, to the effect that he was canceling his subscription because he was sick and tired of reading editorials in which Asimov talked about Asimov in his swollen-headed, egotistical way. I couldn't think of any way of keeping him within the fold, for I knew very well that Asimov would continue to creep into my editorials and, for that matter, into almost anything else I write in essay form. It's part of the informality of my style of writing and I console myself with the thought that most of my readers don't mind.

Of course, the size of my ego is taken for granted even by many people who don't find themselves offended by it. I was interviewed on National Public Radio recently and the interviewer said, in a perfectly friendly way, "It is frequently said, Dr. Asimov, that you lack false modesty. What about it?"

I responded, cheerfully, "Most people, when told that I lack false modesty, would respond, 'Or any other kind, either.' I admit it, but what I'm not modest about, I have no reason to be modest about."

Yet some things shake me. The other day I picked up the January, 1985, issue of this magazine and settled down to read the Viewpoint essay, "Superintelligence" by Tom Rainbow (may he rest in peace).

First came the nasty shock of seeing the introductory illustration to the article. It showed (as you may recall) little men opening the skull and studying the brain of someone who is a virtually photographic representation of myself. What's more, throughout the essay, Tom kept using me as an example of superintelligence and seemed to take the attitude that this was so self-evident that no one would argue the point.

My heart sank. I don't mind being considered vain, but I hate to have people come to that conclusion because of false assumptions.

You must understand that the beauteous Shawna McCarthy has a completely free hand in organizing this magazine. She is not compelled to ask my advice on purchases or to show me anything in advance—unless she is uncertain about something and *wants* my advice, and that doesn't happen often.

Well, Tom didn't consult me in

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writing the essay, and Shawna didn't consult me in purchasing and publishing it. I received no hint of its existence until I opened the January, 1985 issue and, in all innocence, settled down to read the article.

Someone might say something like, "Oh, well, maybe that swell-headed bum didn't insist on being called superintelligent, but Shawna must know which side her bread is buttered on, and she feels compelled to flatter him."

And that someone would be wrong. You should have watched Shawna, about half a year ago, hand back an essay I had submitted. "Not for us, Isaac," she said, stifling a yawn. "Peddle it elsewhere. Don't try to stick *me* with it."

Well, maybe she didn't use those exact words, but she certainly rejected my essay, so she doesn't feel at all compelled to flatter me.

All this doesn't mean I'm now going to insist I'm modest and demure. I'm not. —But, as I told the National Public Radio interviewer, my immodesty is legitimate. I *know* that I'm a prolific, facile, and excellent writer of science fiction, mysteries, and non-fiction of many varieties; and I know that I'm one of the best off-the-cuff, after-dinner speakers in the world.

I'd be a liar if I denied these things, and a posturing fool if I pretended I didn't know it.

But my immodesty ends there. Were I really vain, I'd insist I was great in directions in which I am

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untalented—and I don't. I am perfectly willing to point out that I was never good at sports, that I can't play any musical instrument, that I sing only moderately well, can't dance, can't ride a bicycle, and am physically clumsy at activities that require deftness (with some exceptions, like typewriters and women). I'll even admit, cheerfully, that there are some kinds of writing I can't do. I can't write books on economics, psychology, art, or higher mathematics, and I can't write for the visual media since I lack the talent for it.

But that brings us to the question of whether I am intelligent, let alone "superintelligent," as Tom pretended to take for granted. I say "pretended" because Tom was well-known to be a joker, and may well have been making straight-faced fun of me.

Intelligence is, I have always thought, an elusive abstraction that is hard to pin down. To be sure, it would be hard to argue that anyone who writes and speaks as well as I do can be unintelligent, but is intelligence a simple thing that can be measured in a simple way?

I don't think so. I am convinced that what we call "intelligence" is a property of the mind that is as complex as is the mind itself, and has as many facets. If you take any given person, you will find that the extent of his intelligence varies according to what aspect of his behavior you are considering. I imagine it would be possible for a person to seem a moron in every possible way until you (let us say) put cards in his hand, and discover, to your sorrow, that he is very intelligent about playing poker. As a matter of fact, the current play/movie "Amadeus" rests its psychological point upon its contention that Mozart was a transcendent genius in composing music and was a dunce in every other way.

And so it is with me. People who concentrate on the quantity, quality and diversity of my writing are liable to feel certain that I am superintelligent, while people who know me socially are always surprised when I go for two hours without doing something stupid.

Thus, my various editors at Doubleday and Company, who feel completely secure about my writing and who know that I can be counted upon to meet my deadlines with items that are publishable and profitable, nevertheless have had occasion to tell me, now and then, (in the most loving possible way) that I "need a keeper."

Let me give you a very recent example of what I mean, something that my beloved younger brother, Stan Asimov (Vice-President in charge of Development at Newsday) would have no compunction in calling an example of my "superstupidity."

Newsday, a large and flourishing newspaper based in Long Island, was introducing a new weekly science section, and Stan phoned me to ask if I would give an address on the occasion to a group of Newsday officials and key advertisers,

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and I agreed. Furthermore, Stan said he would arrange to have me paid $4000 for my trouble. (This is well below what I usually gouge out of people who want me to give a talk for them, but blood is thicker than water.)

Months later I gave the talk and, by that time, I had forgotten all about the promised payment.

Then, months after the talk, late on a Friday afternoon, I received a call from Newsday and this is the conversation:

Newsday: "May I have your social security number, Dr. Asimov?"

Asimov (suspiciously): "Why?"

Newsday: "So we can write out a check for you."

Asimov (surprised): "A check for what?"

Newsday: "For the speech you gave about the science section."

Asimov (totally astonished): "A check? For how much?"

Newsday (now puzzled itself): "For four thousand dollars."

Asimov (flabbergasted): "But wasn't I doing it for nothing?"

Newsday (shocked): "You mean you don't want the money?"

Asimov (recovering): "No, no. If you're offering it, then I'll force myself to take it."

I hastily gave Newsday my social security number and did a little thinking. I knew that the person who called me would get in touch with my brother first thing Monday morning and say something like, "Stan, your brother was under the impression he was giving the talk for nothing. Do we really have to pay him?"

I decided I had better talk to Stan first, so a little later in the evening, I phoned Stan at home.

I said, "Stan, remember that talk I gave a couple of months ago for the science section?"

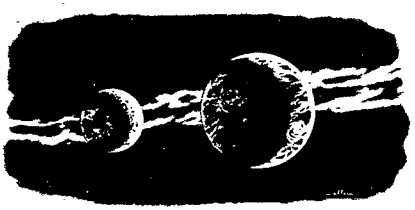
He did, and I thereupon told him the entire story of the phone conversation as I have given it here. "Please," I said, "be sure and tell them I was supposed to get the money, if they come to you and ask."

At this, Stan said, in a very testy manner, "Why do you tell me this on a Friday evening, Isaac?"

I was taken aback at his evident annoyance, and asked, "What's the difference *when* I tell you?"

And he said, "Because now I have to wait until Monday morning to tell everybody at Newsday the latest 'my stupid brother, Isaac' story, and having to wait will ruin my entire weekend."

So much for superintelligence! ●



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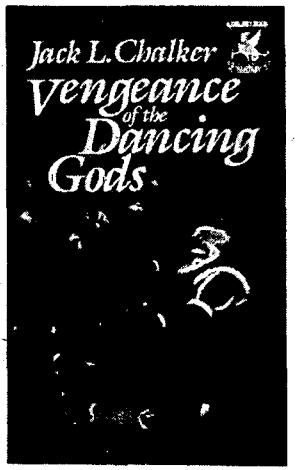
Behold a Wizard's wrath!

Throckmorton P. Ruddygore, master wizard, had troubles again—but this time, they were partly of his own making. He'd finally beaten the dark Baron, stripped him of all magical power, and exiled him from Husaquahr to Earth. But he hadn't counted on the Baron to use a computer there to create even more sinister spells...



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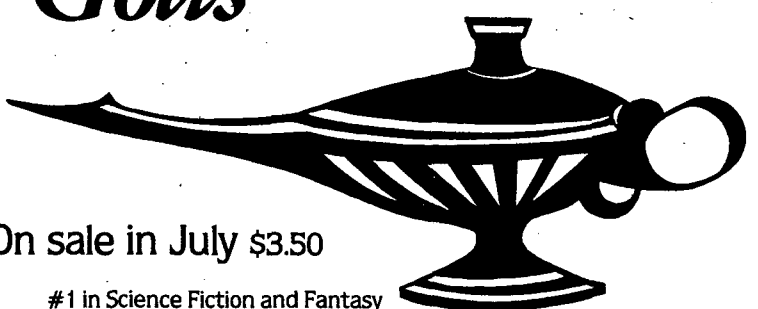

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LETTERS

Gentlefolk:

As I said before, I think you have a wonderful magazine. However, I have a proposal to you and your readers.

I have noticed that many who write to *IAsfm* do not seem to enjoy the genre-related TV shows and movies. "They aren't really SF," they say. Well, I don't claim to have THE solution, but I do have an idea I would like to put to you and your readership.

How about a CABLE TV STATION devoted to the SF/F genre?

I don't have any financial backing or a transmitter to spare. I do have drive and determination. I feel the time is right for this project to begin.

I see this station as broadcasting genre TV shows and movies. I also see it broadcasting original programs, based upon books not yet filmed. It will take time, cooperation, and hard work, but I think it can be done.

I hope you will put this to your readers. I want suggestions and support. Let's get this thing going!

Robert L. Collins
113 N. Rhonnda Lot 27
Andover, KS 67002

It's an interesting idea, but we science fiction enthusiasts tend to live in a closed universe consisting of people who are fascinated by SF, so that we come to believe the whole world is. I suspect that while millions and hundreds of millions are interested in the special effects of sci-fi, not enough are interested in the ideas of SF to support such a cable TV station.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

On the current debate as to whether or not you should tighten your editorial policy and print more "Science Fiction" stories: Please continue publishing the stories which you like best. I have only recently started reading your magazine, but it seems to me that many of your best stories (for instance, Elissa Malcohn's "Lazuli" in the November 1984 issue) have been somewhat outside of what many people think of as SF. While it may be true that some readers would "rather read bad science fiction than a good murder story" (to quote Edwin Hymas's letter in the December *IAsfm),* I think many of us would prefer to read the best stories available. Period.

In any case, I agree with Dr. Asimov: It all depends on how you define science fiction. Even much of what is regarded as hard core science fiction has a rather tenuous

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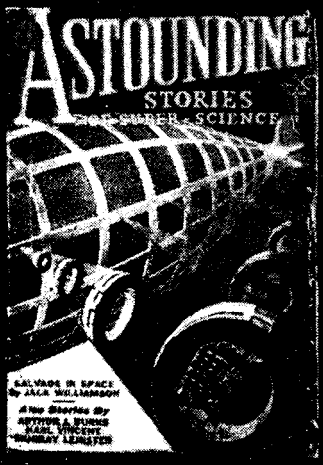

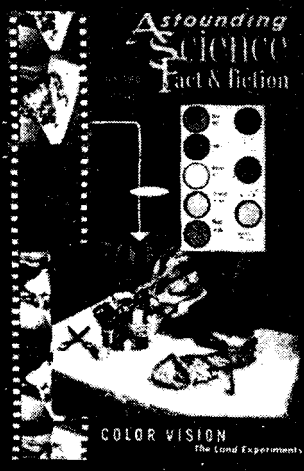

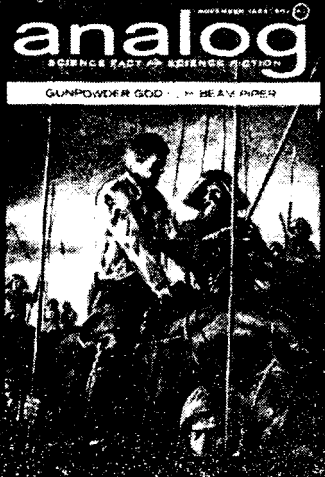

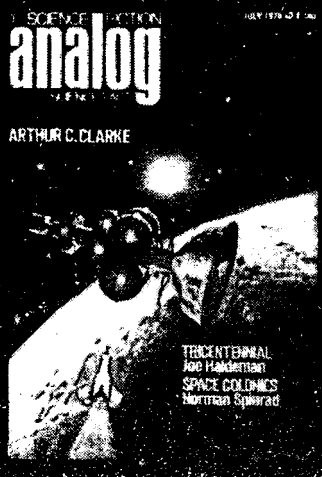

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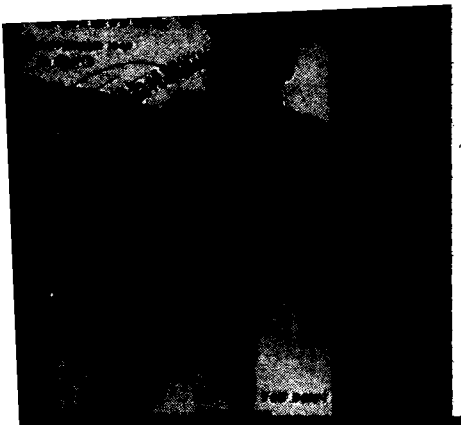

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relation to science; Dr. Asimov's own foundation series is based on the "development" of psychology in ways that are at best unlikely and at worst absurd. Which is not, I believe, a valid criticism of the work. The purpose of a science fiction story is to entertain the reader and to explore the human condition. What differentiates SF from the rest of modern fiction—in my view—is that it attempts to investigate the human condition in a world different than the one we know. Aliens, alternate worlds, scientific developments which have not—on this world—taken place —all are the legitimate concerns of SF. So why not sheer fantasy as well? Why not have magic, or trolls, or goblins? Since none of it is this world, what's the difference? A purist might argue that SF should be a logical development of an at least possible scientific development. I believe that there are really very few such stories around, and in any case the word "possible" is elastic and open to interpretation.

Well, in any case, *I* don't object to fantasy stories.

To shift gears, I would like to compliment you on the November 1984 Viewpoint column, which featured Lewis Thomas. Mr. (well, I suppose I should say Dr.) Thomas has long been one of my favorite writers, and I would have bought the November issue for him alone. I'd like to encourage you to try and get more columns from Lewis Thomas; as long as people of his stature are writing Viewpoint, it will be one of the best parts of your magazine.

I guess that's it. Oh, I'd like to ask you for your manuscript format. A SASE is enclosed, of course.

Sincerely,

Adam Connor
Park Forest, IL

John Campbell, the greatest editor science fiction ever had, used to define science fiction thus: "Science fiction is what a science fiction editor buys for his magazine." I don't know that Shawna would be quite arrogant enough that what she buys is science fiction by definition, but she has a highly individual taste, and is turning out a highly individual magazine. I suspect that the time will come when the "McCarthy 'Asimov's' " will be looked back on nostalgically as a golden age.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Your November editorial is as interesting as ever. As I recall, it is not the first time you have doubted the possibility of surpassing the speed of light. Wasn't it you who said that if a great authority says something is impossible, he is very probably wrong?

When a limit starts to be an everyday NUISANCE, men usually begin thinking of ways to get around it. I can name at least two cases in which the speed of light is so SLOW that it's an annoyance to me. In the first instance, my trusty IBM PC is often so sluggish that I'm ready to whack the keyboard with my fist. Part of this is due to the time it takes the electrical impulses to travel around all their miniature circuits. The second case frequently arises when I telephone from Hawaii to the mainland. If the

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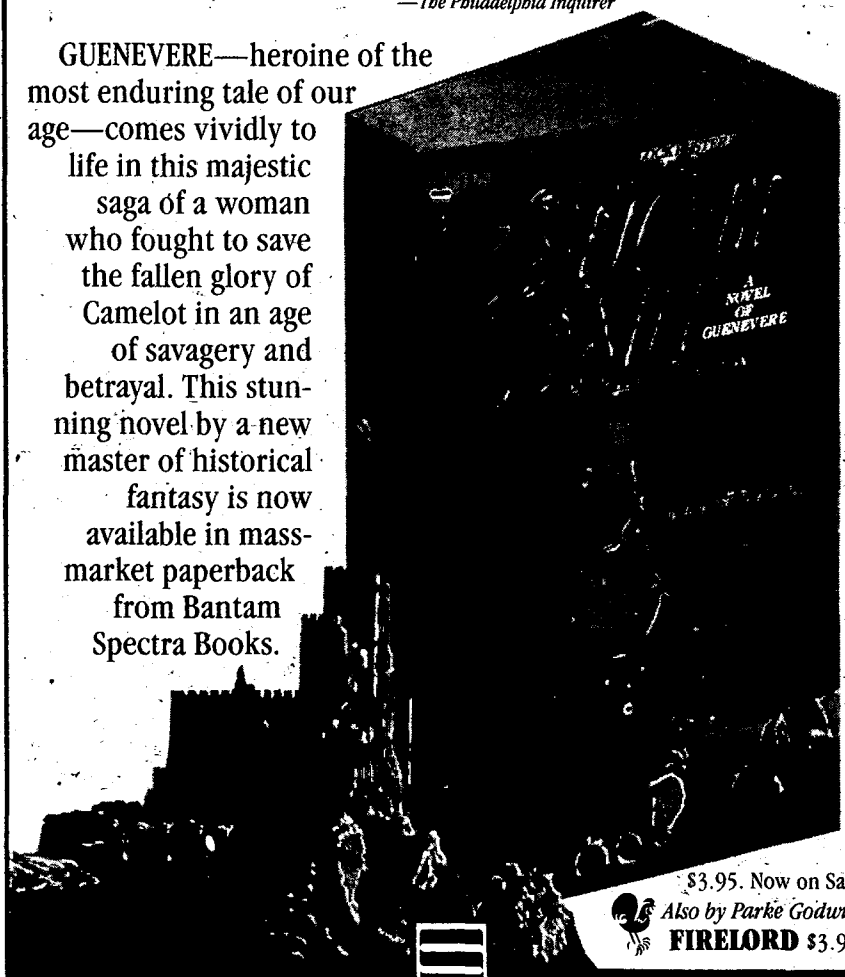

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signal happens to go by satellite instead of cable, it travels 22,000 miles up, 22,000 miles down, and the answer comes another 44,000 miles. But at the speed of light, the trip takes half a second, and a half-second time lag is enough to make hash of any intelligent conversation. You are always starting to speak when you think the other guy has not heard you.

Granted that mass cannot travel faster than light, how about signals? Someone (maybe it was you) once said: "Phase velocity readily exceeds the speed of light." The classic case is that of a wave striking a sea-wall at an angle. The movement of the wavefront is far faster than the speed of the wave itself. If I shine a flashlight at the moon, and then shift it quickly to my neighbor's house, the tip of the beam has changed locations more quickly than light travels between the two points. The problem, of course, is how it may carry a message from the one place to the other. Still, when a limit starts to be a serious annoyance, people generally start to think about overcoming it. The slowness of the speed of light is an annoyance right now, not just in the realm of science fiction. Isn't it about time people started thinking how to circumvent it?

Peter Morse
Honolulu, HI

The quote about great authorities being wrong belongs to Arthur Clarke. The quote about phase velocity belongs to many people and Milton Rothman once had a Scientific American article on the subject. I assure you that you're not going to surpass the speed of light for the purpose of transmitting information no matter how annoyed you get. After all, no matter how annoyed you get with even integers for never yielding an odd result when added or multiplied together, you're not going to find a way of making them do anything else.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

You certainly know how to make my life difficult. After much thought, I had decided to let my subscription slide when it came up for renewal. Then I receive the November issue with Jim Aikin's "Statues" which to my mind isn't even properly either SF or fantasy. What am I supposed to do? How can I take the chance of missing any like stories your editorial talents prompt you to publish? So now I'm living on canned soup until the little bookkeeper in my head says that I've saved enough pennies to renew. I hope you're happy.

Gauntly yours,

R. Arnold
Dallas, TX

Many saints have considered mortification of the body to be a pathway to heaven. By luring you on to subscribing, we not only give you good stories, we starve you into paradise. And at no extra charge, either.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am a new subscriber and a student. I would like to start out by saying that I think you publish an

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excellent magazine and I am happy with the format and content of your fiction and non-fiction. However, I recently received your December issue and was surprised to see in the classified section an advertisement for a term paper catalog. Although those who sell term papers claim that their product is intended only as samples, we all know that this is still a form of plagiarism. I urge you to reconsider your support of this reprehensible and unethical practice. Please discontinue placing these advertisements in your magazine. I value academic integrity and see plagiarism, especially of this kind, as an injustice to honest students. In conclusion, I sincerely hope that the ad was a mistake and this letter unnecessary.

Yours truly,

Steven Dunlap
New York, NY

The trouble is that I think those classified ads are inserted as a unit. It may be difficult to eliminate one dubious item without eliminating it all, and our margin of profit is so narrow that our business office would not enjoy eliminating it all.

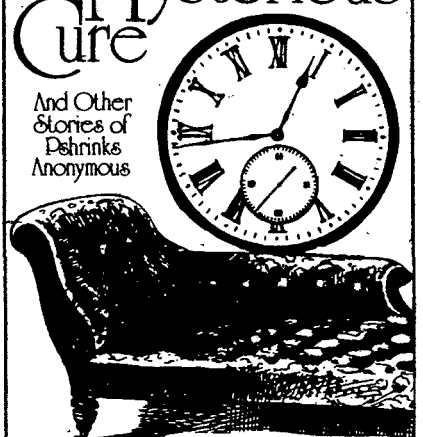
—Isaac Asimov

13 is your lucky number.

This collection of J. O. Jeppson's popular stories includes thirteen of the strange tales psychiatrists tell about their patients at the monthly meeting of Pshrinks Anonymous. You'll read about the man whose brain cells begin to act like silicon chips; the woman whose hot flashes trip her across a time warp; the all-out alien invasion during the Pshrinks' August vacation; the universal allergy and the cosmic sneeze. *Introduction by Isaac Asimov.* $11.95 at bookstores now.

J.O. Jeppson's The Mysterious Cure

And Other Stories of Pshrinks Anonymous



Doubleday Science Fiction

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Wendy and Richard Pini's *Elfquest* comic books have been translated into a fantasy role-playing game by Chaosium Inc. ($20.00 at your local store, or direct from Box 6302, Albany, CA 94706).

The twenty *Elfquest* books, begun in 1978, tell the saga of the elves' search for a new homeland after their forest "Holt" (giant trees, magically shaped to provide living quarters) is destroyed by humans. The elves, who are "wolfriders," begin a search for a home free of humans, and their journey evolves into a quest for their origins. They encounter hostile trolls, butterfly-winged "preservers," friendly humans, and, most surprising to them, other elves who ride hawks and elk. Some of the better-known characters in the series are Cutter, Leetah (his mate), and Skywise. The pointy-eared elves go through many exciting adventures in the World of Two Moons.

The series has attracted many fans, and it wasn't surprising that a publisher would be interested in turning the Pini's now-famous story into a role-game. However, the Pinis, who don't play games, were surprised at the creativity and imagination involved in role-playing.

In the forward to the game, they explain how they were initially skeptical of Chaosium's *Elfquest* spin-off: "How can the throwing of dice be considered an exercise in imagination?" Once they became involved on the project, they "learned two things: there are a lot of imaginative people out there, and fantasy role-playing is not the mechanical, mindless pursuit we once thought. It requires its own kind of creativity, its own committment. It stretches the muscles of the imagination."

The *Elfquest* game contains two books, a map, character statistic sheets, reference sheets, a sample of play, and five polyhedra dice.

The 72-page *Elfbook* has the game system rules and player information, such as character creation, skills, elf magic, and how to resolve combat. Using this book, you can create your own elf character, or re-create one from the *Elfquest* stories.

The 36-page *Worldbook* includes additional rules information needed by the referee or gamemaster (GM), such as creatures and monsters with which to beset the players' elf-characters, and three short scenarios or adventures. A lot of background material detailing the paleolithic world of *Elfquest* is provided, along with a complete glossary, to help a GM design his own adventures.

A 17-by-22-inch map of the World of Two Moons shows the path of the wolfriders quest, along with key locations, to orient the players in their adventures.

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There's a short, 4-page folder that outlines a sample of play, reference sheets with combat tables, magic tables, etc., and eleven different types of character sheets with blanks on which players can draw their own characters and keep statistical information on their character during play. Three six-sided dice and two 20-sided (percentile) dice are also included.

All of the materials, including the rules books, map, and additional sheets, are profusely illustrated with art by Wendy Pini from the original *Elfquest* books. This presentation not only is attractive, it also fills in the storyline as you study the rules, and gives the game a real "feel" of the *Elfquest* saga.

Most role-playing games use dice-acquired characteristics to determine the make-up of a player's character. In *Elfquest,* these characteristics include: strength, constitution (health and endurance), size, intelligence, (magical) power, dexterity (physical coordination), and appearance (comeliness—elves are very good looking; other races are not so fortunate).

The number values that represent each characteristic are used when needed during play—such as climbing a tree, fighting a troll, or healing a wounded friend. For example, if an action has a 37 percent chance of success, and your character is not good at that kind of action (low number value), it would take a very lucky dice roll to succeed at the attempt with your character.

Most of the time, however, you and your fellow adventurers make decisions or choices from situations presented to you by the GM. A typical problem might be: "You come to a large tree with a door cut into it." Your options are to study the tree for magic or traps, test the door to see if it's locked, or simply batter the door down and go inside. This sort of interplay between the GM and the players is what constitutes role-playing.

Although the Pinis indicate they may take a "sabbatical" after the twentieth issue of their series, you can still keep the *Elfquest* story alive and expanding—through the colorful role-playing game by Chaosium. ●

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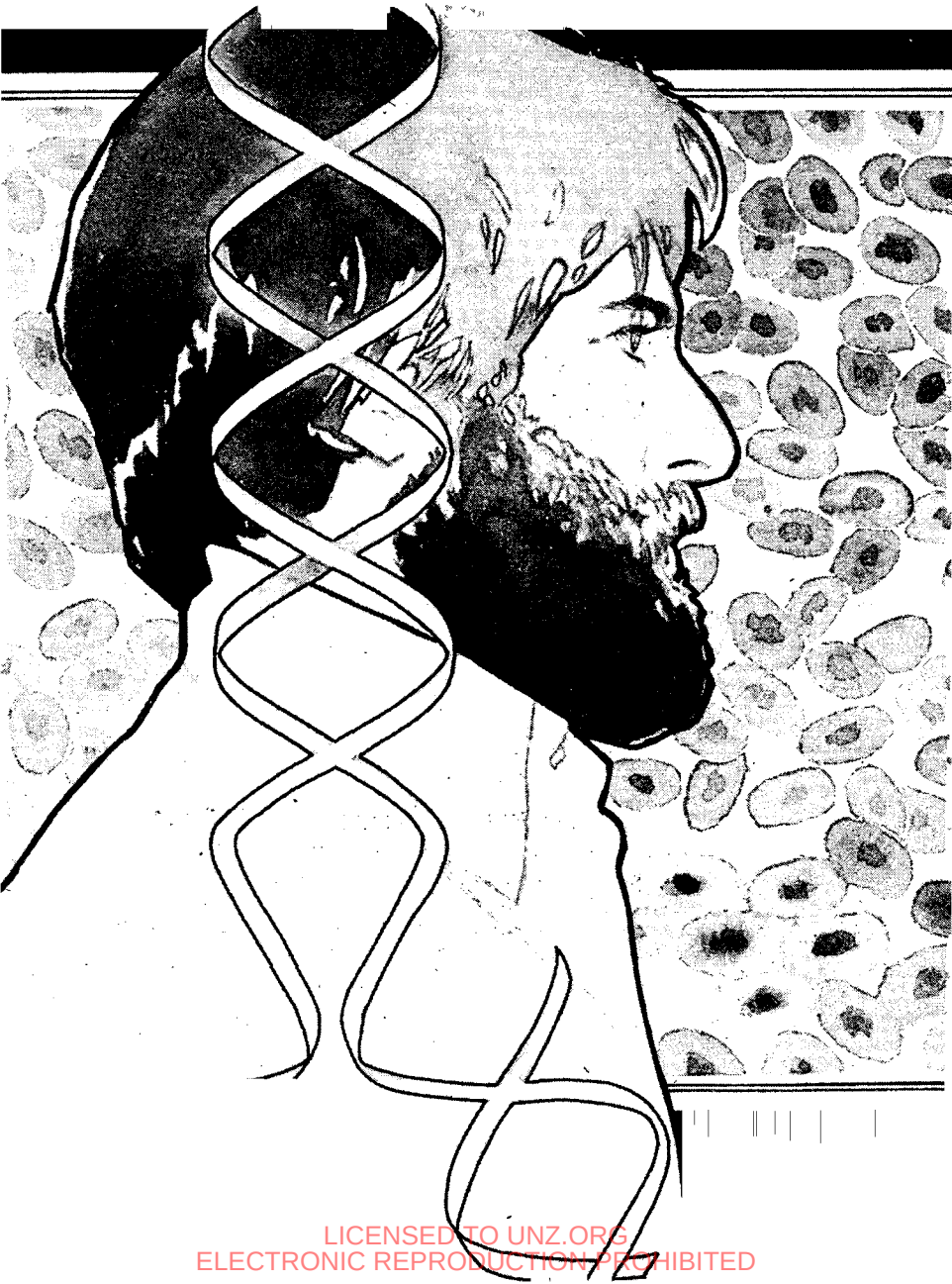

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VIEWPOINT

THE SCIENCE-FICTION OF SEX CHANGE

art: Val Lakey Lindahn

by Tom Rainbow

In stories and novels by writers like John Varley and Robert Heinlein, characters seem to switch with ease from one sex to the other. Our seventh Viewpoint by the late Dr. Tom Rainbow looks at some possible scientific mechanisms for the sex changes of the future, and describes some of the side effects these changes may wreak.

Have you ever wondered about life as the opposite sex? This, for the benefit of our less socially adept readers, would mean that if you are *male*, you would become *female*, and if you are *female*, you would become *male*.

Imagine, for instance, that an unscrupulous manufacturer of sanitary napkins tries to increase its sales by developing a recombinant DNA virus that turns males into females. And all you guys out there, the ones that tell jokes about how many women

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VIEWPOINT

it takes to screw in a light bulb, you get *infected* with it. Would you suddenly utter expressions like "Oh, Mercy Me! Yucky Pooh!," get negative scores on video games, and pass up *IAsfm* in favor of magazines with articles like "One Woman's Struggle To Have Her Toaster-Oven's Baby Plus *Yummy* Treats You Can Make With Creamed Cucumber"?

Gee, I *hope* so. It would serve you rampant sexists right if you couldn't screw in a light bulb or two! Aside from being a fitting punishment for your heinous, sexist crimes, the concept of sex change occurs frequently in science fiction. There is Robert Heinlein's novel, *I Will Fear No Evil*, about a transsexual brain transplant. John Varley's "Nine Worlds" future history postulates that sex-change operations will become almost as common as haircuts. Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes place on a planet of genetically engineered hermaphrodites. There are also many other stories or novels, some by such notables as Frank Herbert, Robert Silverberg, and Samuel Delaney, where sex change is an important

"The Perverto Ray has also transformed your brain into that of the opposite sex. The question is would you now *think* or *act* more like a male or a female? ... In a variety of cultures, males perform better on tests of visual-spatial ability, while females are superior in verbal skills. These differences are typically on the order of 30 to 50 percent. This is why such standardized tests as the S.A.T. rank the scores of males and females separately, because you would otherwise be ranked against strange alien beasts that possess specific cognitive skills markedly superior to your own."

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plot device.

One explanation for this fascination with sex change is that many science fiction writers are known *perverts*. *I*, for instance, like to dress up as Princess Leia to do my grocery shopping. But it's also true that the concept of life as the opposite sex is an intriguing one, and certainly worthy of speculation. The physical differences between the sexes are so vast that you'd probably have to take a graduate-level course just to re-learn how to use a rest-room. But would there be any cognitive or emotional differences? Would you think and act more like the opposite sex? This could result from sex differences in the structure of the brain. Sex differences are known to exist in the brains of other mammals, and they may very well occur in human brains. Would, for instance, the Yucky-Pooh center be larger in female brains than in male brains? Would the neurons in this region fire faster in response to such stimuli as *dress shields* and *creamed cucumber*? This could explain many of the observed sex differences in human behavior, particularly if these same brain cells participate in certain forms of cognitive-mechanical manipulation, such as that involved in *light-bulb* changing.

Human Sex Differences

Consider, perhaps, that you are walking along the street. You are minding your own business, maybe thinking that you should see *Return of The Jedi* for the 1043rd time. Just as you turn the corner, some backlist science fiction writer leaps from the shadows, cackles pervertedly, and shines a 30th century *sex change* ray on you, instantaneously transforming you, molecule by molecule, into the opposite sex. Oh well, you think, that's the way it goes sometimes. You proceed to the movie, hoping you haven't missed those great scenes with Jabba the Hutt.

Heck, physically, you may as well have been transformed into some sort of strange alien beast. Your biochemistry is still carbon-water based, and you still use DNA as your genetic material, but otherwise, every cell in your body has changed. Your entire skeleton has re-arranged itself, changing in overall size and

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density, with additional specific changes in the bones of the skull and the pelvis. There are changes in the relative size of your heart and lungs, general and specific changes in your distribution of body fat, and large differences in your amount of muscle tissue. If you were a women, you have now become virtually a superbeing, having, on the average, triple your former upper body strength. Most startling of all, like a true extraterrestrial, you have developed entirely new external and internal organs, the functions of which you can barely guess.

The Perverto Ray has also transformed your brain into that of the opposite sex. The question is would you now *think* or *act* more like a male or a female? There is good evidence that there are behavioral and cognitive differences between the sexes. In a variety of cultures, males perform better on tests of visual-spatial ability, while females are superior in verbal skills. These differences are typically on the order of 30 to 50 percent. This is why such standardized tests as the S.A.T. rank the scores of males and females separately, because you would otherwise be ranked against strange alien beasts that possess specific cognitive skills markedly superior to your own. There is also good evidence that males show more physical aggression than females, regardless of how this term is defined, while females display more behavior that psychologists describe as nurturant. There is some evidence for gender differences in other cognitive or emotional areas, including such things as compliance, timidity, and tactile sensitivity, but not enough studies have been done to say conclusively that these differences exist.

Sexual Differentiation of the Brain

No one, not even a feminist psychologist, doubts the reality of cognitive and behavioral sex differences. What is hotly disputed is the reason for these sex differences. A feminist psychologist would argue that gender differences in behavior and cognition result from differences in *socialization*—males and females behave differently because they receive different social programming. Women are overtly or subliminally

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BETWEEN THE STROKES OF NIGHT

Charles Sheffield

"JUST WHEN YOU THINK THERE CAN'T POSSIBLY BE ANYTHING MORE YOU REALIZE HE'S JUST GETTING GOING!" —*Analog*

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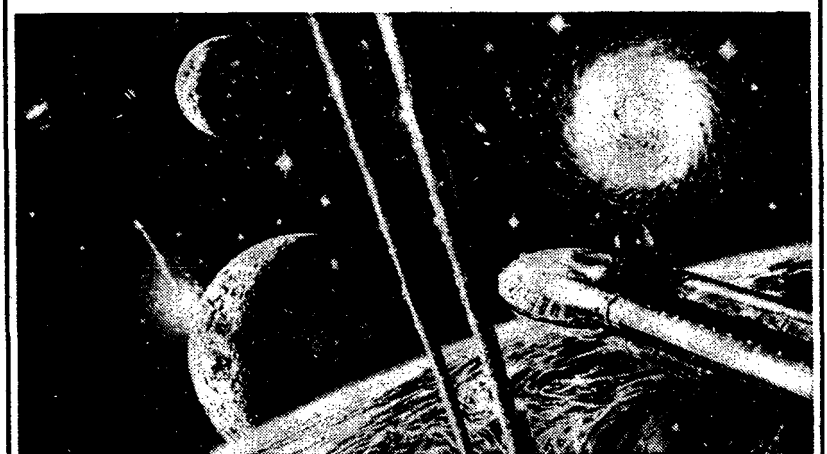
Only a remnant of humankind escaped the Nuclear Spasm, in primitive orbiting colonies safe from the war below. But when the battle for mere existence was won, the exodus began...and Man found new worlds far from the ruined Earth.



27,698 A.D.:

To these worlds come the Immortals, beings with strange ties to ancient Earth, beings who seem to live forever, who can travel light years in days – and who use their strange powers to control the existence of ordinary mortals.

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discouraged from learning mathematics, so naturally, they perform worse than males in tests of mathematical ability. When sexist society is eliminated in the far future, where all of us science-fiction readers would like to have summer homes, males and females will act the same. The alternative explanation is that human sex differences result in large part from differences in *brain function*, produced by prenatal sex differences in testosterone exposure. Men are better at math because they have more neurons specialized for math functions; women are better at verbal tasks because they have more neurons specialized for verbal skills. In this view, socialization would only be important in that it acts to amplfy or diminish innate sex differences.

We need to decide between these explanations, if we are to properly evaluate the effects of the Perverto Ray. If cognitive and behavioral sex differences result from socialization, then your thoughts and emotions would remain the same after the sex change, because your memories would not be affected by the Perverto Ray. Alternatively, if it is sex differences in brain structure that produce behavioral and cognitive sex differences, then you would think and act like the opposite sex, because the Perverto Ray would give you a gender-reversed brain.

There is much evidence that behavioral sex differences in other mammals, such as rodents, result from innate brain differences. This, *a priori*, might suggest that human sex differences result from a similar cause, as we and rodents evolved from a similar ancestor. At the risk of sounding a little like *Science 84*, let's go over this evidence.

To begin, without the intervention of molecular information coded by the Y-chromosome, all mammals would develop *in utero* as females. Specific, poorly understood proteins, made by genes on the Y-chromosome, transform the undifferentiated gonad into a fetal testis. The lack of this molecular re-programming would cause the indifferent gonad to become an ovary. The fetal testis will then make the steroid hormone, *testosterone*, which

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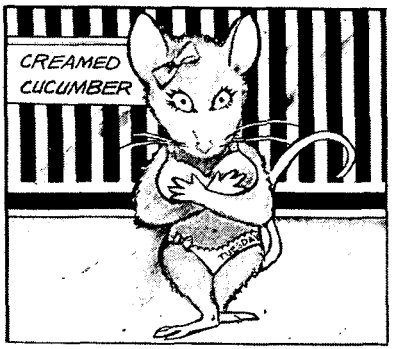

"A feminist psychologist would argue that gender differences in behavior and cognition result from differences in *socialization*—males and females behave differently because they receive different social programming. Women are overtly or subliminally discouraged from learning mathematics, so naturally, they perform worse than males in tests of mathematical ability. When sexist society is eliminated in the far future, where all of us science-fiction readers would like to have summer homes, males and females will act the same."

triggers the formation of male-specific organs, such as the penis and seminal vesicles. Without the secretion of testosterone from the fetal testes, the external appearance of the male neonate would appear identical to that of a genetic female. Human males, born with a congenital lack of cellular testosterone receptors, will have the external genitalia of females at birth, and upon puberty, will show the secondary sexual characteristics of normal teenage girls, because of increased sensitivity to the low levels of estrogen normally made by males. They are infertile, however, because they lack ovaries, having instead, small internal testes. It is their infertility, and the presence of these testes that allows physicians to recognize these women as genetic males. Similarly, the external genitalia of a genetic female will be masculinized by the administration of testosterone during pregnancy. If you suspect that Mommy is carrying your little baby sister, and you've always wanted a little baby brother, just slip Mommy several grams of testosterone during the

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second trimester of pregnancy.

For non-human mammals, there is good evidence that testosterone also masculinizes the brain. In rodents, which undergo much of their brain development after birth, the castration of a male pup will cause it to show feminine behavior as an adult: it will want to be mounted by males instead of trying to mount females, it will show less aggressive behavior, and have a lower threshold for the activation of maternal behavior. Similarly, administering testosterone to a female rat pup will cause it to show normal masculine behavior as an adult, with little or no feminine behavior. These sex-switching effects of testosterone occur only during the first few days of life: after that, the brain is permanently masculinized or feminized.

It is generally thought that testosterone masculinizes the developing brain by producing changes in minute anatomical or chemical brain circuits. It is well-established that such sex differences in brain circuits exist, and there is limited but credible evidence that these sex differences are causally linked to the behavioral actions of testosterone.

Human Sexual Differentiation

Now, what is the evidence that innate brain differences are responsible for human sex differences? This question is complicated by the inability to do decent, well-controlled experiments on humans. *Sigh!* The experiments themselves are kind of obvious. For example, to test the relative roles of hormones and socialization on human sex differences, we contact our good friend, *Jabba the Pediatric Neuroendocrinologist.* Jabba has just delivered a baby. Unbeknownst to the parents, he has performed a mini-sex change operation on their new-born child, altering its external genitalia and removing its gonads. Jabba then proudly presents the baby to the parents, who simply believe it was born the apparent sex, and raise the child accordingly. Around puberty, he administers estrogen or testosterone to the kid, so that it develops the appropriate secondary sexual characteristics. As it gets older, Jabba makes some sort of excuse as to why it can't parent its own

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kids. Throughout the child's development, its behavior is monitored for deviations from its sex of rearing. Ideally, this would be done by an observer unaware of the child's status, so that the results would not be inadvertently biased. This experiment would be done on perhaps twenty children, 10 males and 10 females, with results being compared to an equal number of normal children, and a "control" group of kids, who received sham sex change surgery as babies. Jabba then submits his findings to a major scientific journal, slyly mentioning that he will *eat* the editorial board if his article isn't published.

Strangely, there are enough babies born that this sort of experiment has been done almost by accident. For example, consider the hazards of practicing advanced notions of hygiene with equipment that's not UL approved: There are male babies who have *lost* their external genitalia because of *shorts* in the circumcision needle. To the delight of us Jabbaesque neuroscientists, the recommended medical practice is to raise these babies as girls. That way, they'll have a relatively normal sex life*. Although only a few of these kids have been studied, they adapt very readily to their new sex, acting very much like typical little girls. Nobody has reported follow-up studies, but the assumption is that when these kids are given estrogen at puberty, they'll act like typical big girls, getting crushes on all the football players, and probably wanting to *throw up* if your typical adolescent science-fiction reader asks them for a date.

In some ways, they're even *better* than real girls, because they can't get pregnant. This is not to say that they show normal female levels of such things as nurturance or compliance, or greater facility at verbal tasks, relative to spatial ones. These things, to my knowledge, have not been tested. However, their parents describe them as tomboys, showing high, little-boy-like, levels of activity and aggressiveness. Observations on these kids has led to the idea that *gender identity*—what sex you think you are—results largely

*unless, of course, they become science-fiction writers.

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from socialization, while certain gender-specific behaviors, like physical aggression, are determined in part by prenatal hormones. In this view, gender identity is analogous to being reared in a specific religion, i.e.: *You're* an electric blender worshipper, because Mommy and Daddy raised you from infancy to worship the electric blender, and you could *never* marry any man who wasn't also an electric blender worshipper, no matter how sincere in general he was about small household appliances.

It may also be that prenatal hormones synergize with socialization to bias your gender identity towards one sex or another. The parents of the excessively-circumcised kids probably try very hard to raise their children as girls, given their own fears about their child reverting to her sex of birth. Thus, a strongly feminine upbringing might be able to overcome a weak innate bias towards a masculine gender identity. However, a somewhat muddled sexual upbringing, combined with abnormal prenatal hormones, might result in discordances in gender identity. This could explain such things as transsexuality and homosexuality, which lack either a clear environmental or hormonal cause.

There is more evidence that gender-specific behaviors are modified by pre-natal hormones. There are examples of female babies who were exposed to male levels of testosterone before birth. This often occurs because the fetus lacks an enzyme that converts testosterone into other steroid hormones, thus causing testosterone molecules to accumulate. These female babies show masculinized external genitalia, but normal internal organs, so are usually recognized as girls. It is relatively easy to correct both the hormone accumulation and the genitalia defect, allowing these androgenized females to grow up as normal women.

They act, however, kind of *masculine*, compared to matched controls. As kids, they are regarded as tomboys by many criteria: they prefer activities with a high energy expenditure, they don't like to wear little frilly dresses, and they would rather play with trucks or toy guns than

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with dolls. Not known is their relative preference for science-fiction over meaningful stories about dress shields, or whether they rank creamed cucumber over bacon-double-cheeseburgers. Their gender identity, however, is female, and upon adolescence, they appear to become relatively normal teenage girls. This behavioral shift undoubtedly results from the same pragmatic decision that many female readers of this magazine must make, which is that the typical adolescent male will not go to First Base with anyone whose legs are hairer than his own.

Again, your typical card-carrying feminist psychologist would attribute this all to socialization. The super-circumcised males and the androgenized females display gender-atypical behaviors because their parents or teachers have exerted atypical masculinizing or feminizing influences on them, perhaps as a result of knowing their medical histories. The control for this objection would be the Jabba experiment in which parents are unaware of their children's abnormalities. This control has essentially been done for the androgenized females, as certain kinds of androgen treatments will not virilize the external genitalia, but will masculinize behavior. It wasn't really known that these girls had been exposed prenatally to androgenic steroids, until a retrospective study was done. Thus, these little girls were presumably socialized as normal little girls, and yet they still showed little-boy like behavior. It is difficult to do the same experiment for males reared as females, unless we use the Jabba approach of performing a sex change operation before the baby has been seen by its parents. Sex differences in spatial and verbal skills may also be influenced by hormones, but the number of studies on this is somewhat limited. There is one report that androgen-deficient males show impaired spatial abilities, compared to normal controls, and one report that androgenized females are better at spatial tasks, but to use isolated studies like these against the arguments of a hard-core feminist psychologist would be like attacking the Death-Star with a water-pistol. There is very good

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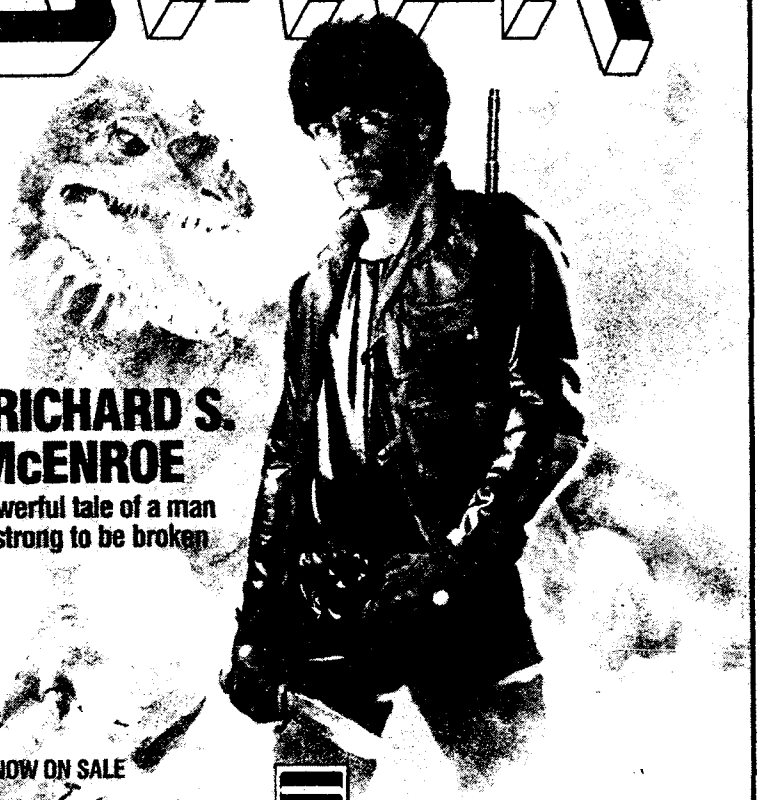
THE ONLY THING TOUGHER THAN DRAGONHIDES
ARE THE MEN WHO HUNT THEM.

SKINNER



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evidence, however, that human sex differences in spatial and verbal skills result from sex differences in brain organization. It is well-established that the left hemisphere of most right-handers is specialized for verbal functions, while the right hemisphere is specialized for spatial processes, and other non-verbal tasks such as music recognition. The typical right-hander will identify a word faster if it is displayed in his right visual field than in his left, because sensory information on the right side of your body arrives first to the left hemisphere. Similarly, the average right-hander will recognize a shape faster if it is shown in his left visual field.

Males and females differ in their degree of asymmetry in hemispheric function. The typical right-handed male has almost all of his verbal skills in his left hemisphere, and almost all of his spatial skills in his right hemisphere, while the typical right-handed female has some verbal ability in her right hemisphere, and some spatial ability in her left hemisphere. Females are less likely to show a loss of verbal or spatial skills in response to damage to either hemisphere, because their cognitive abilities are less lateralized. There is also evidence that the corpus callosum, the nerve bundle that transfers information between the hemispheres, is larger in females than in males. Thus, females may be better cognitive generalists because they have more neurons specialized for interhemispheric communication. They may have less spatial ability than males because more of the neurons in certain parts of their right hemisphere are usurped for verbal functions.

A Science-Fiction Sex Change

In spite of the difficulties in performing on humans the same sort of experimental manipulations that can be performed on rats, the evidence seems relatively good that sex differences in brain function are responsible for some sex differences in cognition and behavior. This information can now be used to predict the behavioral and cognitive differences that would occur after a science-fiction sex change. Obviously, to produce behavioral

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SCIENTISTS, PAST AND FUTURE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE EDGE OF TOMORROW

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—Ben Bova, from its INTRODUCTION

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and cognitive differences, it would be necessary to change the sex of the brain, as well as that of the body. A brain transplant into the body of the opposite sex would not affect the way you think, aside, perhaps, from making you more or less aware of when sanitary napkins are on sale.

Let us assume that the sex change occurs by mind-transfer into a body of the opposite sex, *ala* Jack Chalker's *The Identity Matrix*, and Frank Herbert's *The Dodsai Experiment*, or by that 30th century replacement for the joy-buzzer and the whoopee-cushion, the *Perverto Ray!*

For one thing, your relative abilities at spatial and verbal tasks are going to shift. The differences between males and females on tests of these abilities average from 30 to 50 percent, so let us take this to be the magnitude of your change. What would it be like to experience a change in your cognitive abilities of this extent? Well, if you were a male mathematics genius, and we shined the Perverto Ray on you, you might become a good, but no longer extraordinary, female mathematician. Similarly, if you were a talented female theoretical physicist, the Perverto Ray might give you a genius-level mathematical ability, making you into another Einstein. An aspect of verbal ability for which there is a sex difference is verbal fluency: Women can use words to convey thoughts more easily than can men. If you were a male, it is likely that you would talk more after your sex change, and write with greater facility. If you were an aspiring female science-fiction writer, you might find that as a male, your stories would take longer to write, but your descriptions of interstellar navigation would probably improve.

Your relative propensity for physical aggression would also change. The magnitude of this change would again be about 50 percent, based on the usual sex difference in tests of aggression. If you were male, you might now, as a female, resort to verbal aggression, for which there is no apparent sex difference, or maybe even withdrawal, since you would know that you lost 70 percent of your upper body strength. If you were a female, you would

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probably act a lot like The Incredible Hulk, given that you would have triple your former upper body strength, and a significantly greater desire to hit people. Gee, I hope you realize that I was only *kidding* about women not being able to screw in a light bulb, heh, heh, heh.

If you were formerly a male, the evidence is reasonably good that you would become more nurturant as a female, probably viewing pre-adolescents more as cute, diminutive puppies than as the barely sentient skin cancers of the video game arcades, and the intestinal viri of the *Return of the Jedi* lines that they really are.

There is also some evidence that you would be, on the average, somewhat more timid and more compliant, which would probably be a pleasant relief from your usual obnoxious self. For you girls, you're going to become a veritable Indiana Jones, full of strength, courage, reckless disregard of conventional mores, and sufficient spatial abilities to find a whole mess of Lost Arks! Just be sure you wear a titanium crotch protector before you beat up any Nazis!

"If you were formerly a girl, and the Perverto Ray transformed you into the dashing Dr. Jones, would you actually *fall in love* with floozy blond 1930s torch-singers, or would your idea of a good time still be to have Mark Hamill suck your fingers? Science doesn't know the answer to this. To some extent, it's a question of whether you would abandon your previous gender identity, now that your physical sex has changed. Studies suggest that you will generally want to fool around with the sex that you think you're not."

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VIEWPOINT

Sex, Love, and the Perverto Ray

But if you were formerly a girl, and the Perverto Ray transformed you into the dashing Dr. Jones, would you actually *fall in love* with floozy blond 1930s torch-singers, or would your idea of a good time still be to have Mark Hamill suck your fingers? Science doesn't know the answer to this. To some extent, it's a question of whether you would abandon your previous gender identity, now that your physical sex has changed. The studies with the androgenized girls and the weeniectomized boys suggest that you will generally want to fool around with the sex that you think you're not.

Similarly, it's hard to predict what sex would be like as the opposite sex. According to lots of studies, men have more sexual fantasies and react more to erotic pictures or stories than do women. But it is unclear whether these differences result from hormones or socialization. One study with androgenized females indicated that they had a masculine erotic response, fantasizing about men in the same horrible, slobbering way that men fantasize about women. There is also the question of whether your sexual pleasure would be different if you switched genders. Would your orgasm be more or less intense after the sex change? John Varley, in his story, "Options," has a former woman describe his new male orgasm as "A lot the same. Some different. More localized. Messier." By contrast, the male-to-female character in Heinlein's *I Will Fear No Evil* proclaims upon her first female orgasm, "Oh, God! I never thought it would be like this!" barely preventing herself from becoming a supernova. In both these examples, the sex change was performed by a brain transplant, but assuming the Perverto Ray were used, it would be difficult to expect whether Varley or Heinlein would be right. If you ask men and women to rank the pleasure they obtain from an orgasm, relative to other pleasures, they quite unsurprisingly rank it as first. So, without some objective, neuronal way of evaluating each sex's pleasure, we can't really determine whose orgasm is better.

As we sneeringly tell the grad

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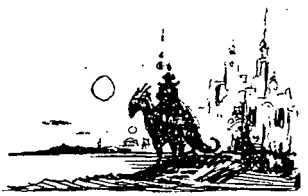
students: When science doesn't *know* the answer to something, we do an *experiment*. You may be interested to know that all science fiction magazines have recently been acquired by a well-known, Fortune 500 conglomerate. Among the many products of this diversified company are *dress shields* and *creamed cucumber*. Sales for dress shields and creamed cucumber are *down*—way *down*. In order to remedy this, management has embedded the pages of this and all other magazines with the *Perverto Virus*, a product of the conglomerate's genetic engineering division.

Are any of you guys feeling a little *swollen* around the chest? Maybe you have a *cramp* or two? Why don't you stop all this endless striving, this eternal desire to master your environment, and have some nice *creamed cucumber* or a *dress shield?*

References

For a critical, feminist enumeration of human sex differences, see *The Psychology of Human Sex Differences*, by Elenore Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, Stanford Univ. Press, 1974. Additional information about brain sexual differentiation can be found in a book, appropriately named, *Sexual Differentiation of the Brain*, edited by Robert Goy and Bruce McEwen, MIT Press, 1979. For more about human psychosexual differentiation, including detailed accounts of the androgenized girls and the genitally ablated boys, read *Man & Woman: Boy & Girl*, by John Money and Anke Ehrhardt, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972. The pictures alone are worth the price of the book. Some good recipes for creamed cucumber can be found in *The Vegetarian Epicure*, by Anna Thomas, Vintage Books, 1974.



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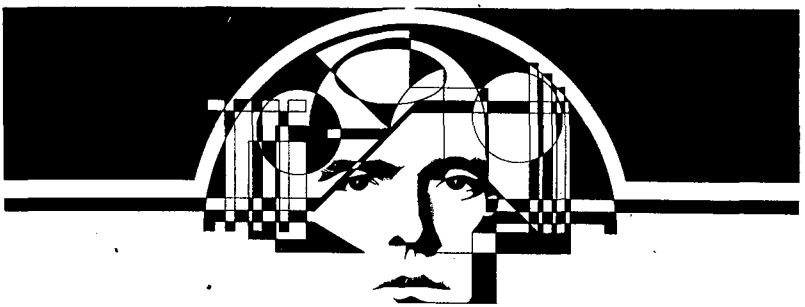
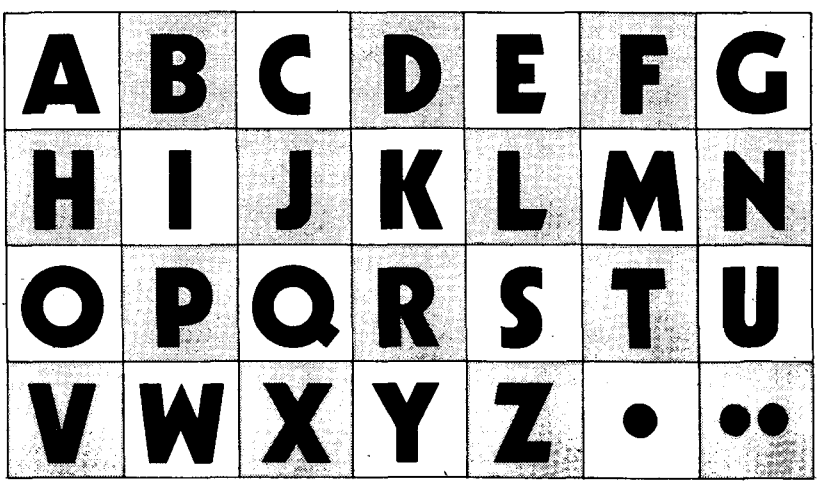
MARTIN GARDNER

PLAYING SAFE ON THE BAGEL



Every officer on the spaceship *USS Bagel* has a private safe in which to keep valuables. The illustration shows the pattern of pushbuttons on each safe. An officer chooses a triplet of three letters, then sets the lock so it opens only when the three letters are pushed in the right order. Duplicate letters are allowed, so the number of possible triplets is 26



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× 26 × 26 = 17,576. Pushing the one-dot button opens the safe. The button with two dots locks it. Officers may alter their triplet whenever they wish.

Tanya, the teen-age daughter of Colonel Couth, head of the ship's computer science division, had been reading a biography of the great twentieth-century physicist Richard Feynman. (Feynman was best known for his introduction of negative probabilities into quantum theory.) As a young man in Los Alamos, where scientists worked on the first atomic bombs, Feynman became skillful at guessing the numerical keys that his fellow-workers selected for their office safes. He liked to leave in their safes little notes warning them of the need for tighter security.

Tanya was soon amusing herself and annoying officers by doing the same thing on the *Bagel*. The officers had a habit of selecting three-letter words that were easily memorized, and that had a special significance for them. VOZ, the name of the ship's computer, was a popular word. (It is obtained from HAL, Arthur Clarke's famous spaceship computer, by shifting each letter 14 steps forward in the alphabet.) Ensign Pulver was enormously fond of science fiction by the great Polish writer Stanislaw Lem. Tanya sneaked into his room one day and, sure enough, LEM opened his safe. Shift each letter of LEM forward 14 steps and you get ZSA, a popular word among crew members who were ancient movie buffs.

Tanya drew up a list of unusual three-letter words such as PYX, CWM, PSI, GRR, TCH, PST, and acronyms like IBM, USA, and so on. It took only a few minutes to run rapidly down the list to see if any of the words opened a safe.

"You've done us all a service," Couth said to his daughter. "Security on the ship is much stronger since you began guessing everybody's secret word. Officers are now starting to randomize their triplets."

"Did you randomize your latest key?" Tanya asked.

"No. I selected a common mathematical word. It uses only letters on the grey keys."

Tanya walked over to the wall safe and studied the buttons. "But how can that be? All the vowels are on white. Even Y is white."

"I know," said Couth. "It's really an astonishing coincidence that A,E,I,O,U, and Y are all at odd-numbered positions in the alphabet. Nevertheless, there *is* a common three-letter word—you hear me use it constantly—with all its letters on gray buttons."

Can you guess the word? The answer is on page 80.

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by Lucius Shepard

THE FUNDAMENTAL THINGS

The author of this interesting piece swears that it isn't exactly science fiction because everything in the story is true. He also tells us that he has glowing references from Con Edison for his work as a janitor in a nuclear power plant, and we wonder whether that work may have somehow terminally shifted him into the world of the seriously comic.

art: J.K. Potter

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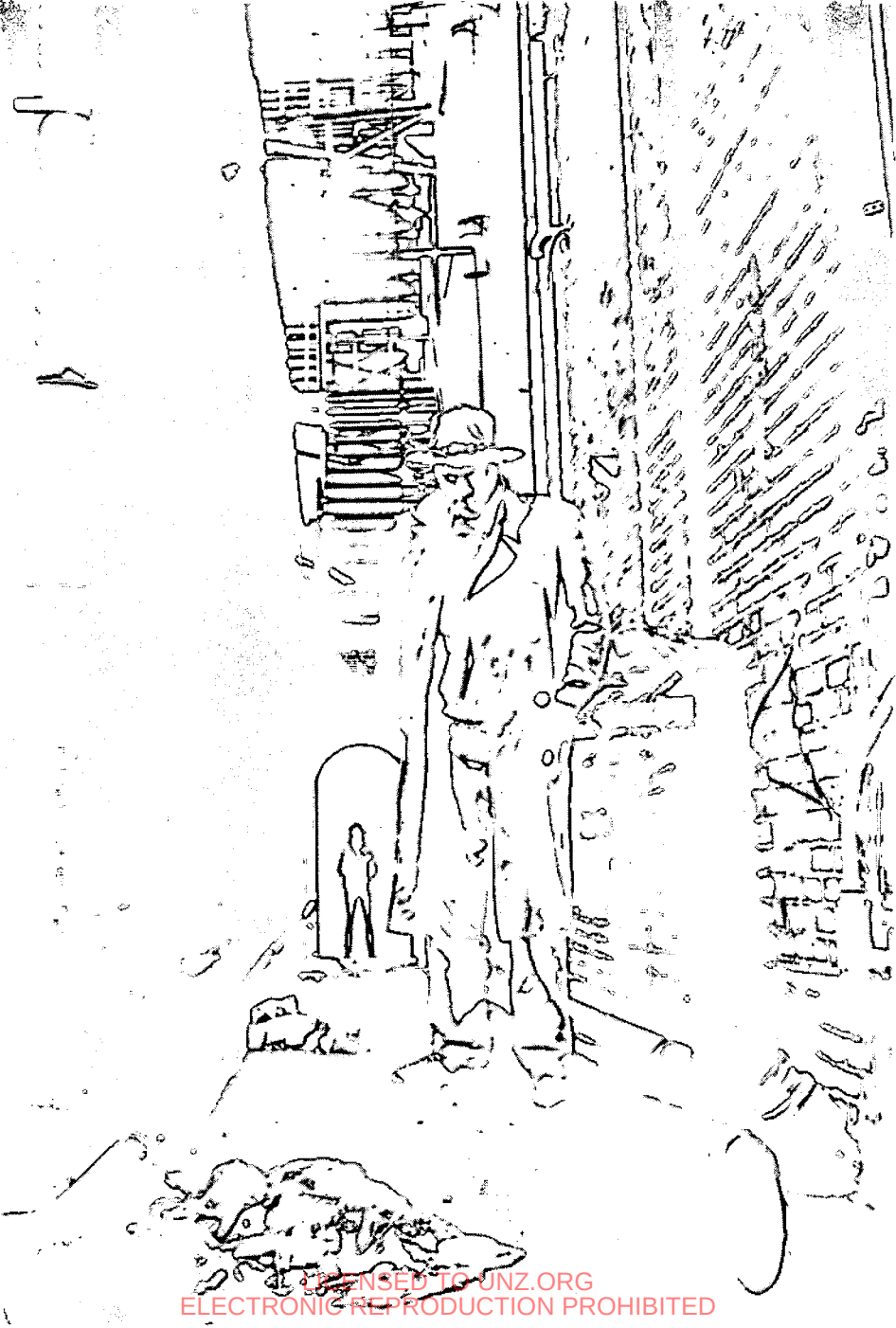

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Jacob Vinograd, a sixty-one-year-old retiree for whom the world had been happily reduced to a verdant fairway flowing like a mighty river between coasts of graceful elms and willows, was preparing to hit a tricky five-iron to the seventeenth green when he achieved a perfect understanding. His stance, he realized, was a touch too open and his clubhead angled out of true. Though this burst of knowledge hardly measured up in terms of historical importance to Moses' illumination on the mount, it struck him with such clarity that he was able to perceive its source, and this was the miraculous thing. The source was his golf ball, a Pro Titleist III . . . or rather its component particles. It was a new ball, yet as Jacob picked it up and stared at the eyelike red dots on its pebbled surface, he felt that he had known the Titleist all his life. Waves of harmony and good fellowship were beaming from the white sphere, as were expressions of gratitude for not having hit it and thus imposing an unwanted randomnicity upon the elegance of its structure. Jacob tossed away his club as if it were a bloody hammer. How could he have been so heartless? Never before had he felt as intimate with anyone as the ball, never before had he been so affected by a personal relationship. He knew himself for a changed man, a cleaner soul, and he owed this newfound strength of character to the beneficent effects of the ball.

Leaving his playing partner (who was staring fixedly at the left front tire of their golf cart) standing on the fairway, Jacob hurried back to the clubhouse, hopped into his Lincoln and drove posthaste to his suburban home in Highland Park, Michigan, eager to tell his wife Carla about this delightful and unexpected turn of events. But upon his arrival he discovered that Carla was preoccupied with her own miraculous change, her special relationship with—as it chanced—her reading glasses. Not only was she in perfect rapport with the tinted lenses and designer frames, but by virtue of seeing through them, the world had become completely readable.

"Everything is written," she told Jacob. "In fact, everything is writing." To prove her thesis she pointed to mystical truths spelled out in Arabic by the mahogany grain of the sideboard, a Taoist commentary formed by the arrangement of lettuce bits and smears of blue cheese dressing on the bottom of a salad bowl, the Sumerian ideograph for Lion God as delineated by a haphazard alignment of forks and knives in a kitchen drawer.

Carla had not shown such interest in life since the passage of her fiftieth birthday, and Jacob was at first happy for her, for himself, and the rest of the "seriously comic world,"—this the term applied to the altered state of human affairs by a famous newscaster—"seriously," because despite the lightheartedness that had at 9:47 A.M. on Thursday last taken consensus reality by storm, deaths and other tragedies continued

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to occur. Still, all in all, the world was a better place now that everyone, even the loneliest of souls, had a familiar (be it a golf ball, a pair of scissors, or a sparkplug) with which to commune. The crime rate dropped; long-standing personal and political differences began to be resolved; advances were made in the sciences, especially in the realm of behavioral physics, an infant discipline that focused upon the intelligence and basic attitudes of sub-atomic particles. However, as the days passed and Carla Vinograd threw herself into her work, Jacob discovered that no matter how profound and compelling was his relationship with the Titleist III, it was no substitute for a wife; and when Carla announced her intention of starting upon her *chef d'oeuvre,* the translation of the wallpaper into Yiddish, a task that would consume her every waking hour for the next seven years, Jacob decided that it was time someone got to the bottom of all this. To that end he engaged the services of his niece's ex-boyfriend, a young Detroit-based private detective named Eddie Samples, thereby unwittingly elevating Eddie to the status of chief protagonist for the remainder of the story and, indeed, for the entire subsequent phase of human history.

Prior to the events of that fateful Thursday, Eddie Samples had been a rather unpleasant person—grasping, devious, and inclined toward kinkiness in his sexual orientation (a character flaw that had led to the dissolution of his romance with Jacob Vinograd's beautiful JAP niece); but his relationship with a 1975 Denver-mint Kennedy silver dollar had transformed him into one of those doomed, ingenuous, earnest young men so often featured in the works of Joseph Conrad. ("It was this topsoil of earnestness spread evenly over the gentle slopes and declivities of his soul that allowed him to perceive every variance of human nature—be it good or evil—as a remarkable instance of inventiveness on the part of the Creator, and thus, no matter how vile such a variance might seem to other men, it was to him eminently acceptable; when, however, an evil seed chanced to take root in this topsoil and spread its roots downward, he found himself unable to bring such a kindly judgment to bear upon his own flaws . . . etc.") So it was that he set about the fulfilling of Jacob Vinograd's charge with a mixture of earnestness, ingenuousness, and a mild premonition of doom.

Having no real idea where to begin, he walked downstairs from his office and stood on the curb of Jefferson Avenue. It was a lovely spring day. "Clair de Lune" issued from a tenement window across the street, and on the corner the sleazy pimp with gassed hair who customarily spent his evenings lounging in a Buick deuce-and-a-quarter was leading a group of his ladies in a medley of tunes from "Hellzapoppin'." They had attracted quite a large and appreciative audience, and the pimp's plumed

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white hat lay on the sidewalk, half full of bills and coins. After stopping a moment to enjoy the music, Eddie walked slowly along the street, fingering his silver dollar. On impulse, wondering exactly how one *could* get to the bottom of all this, he flipped the dollar into the air and called Heads, realizing as he did that he had neglected to assign a course of action to either side of the coin. The silver dollar struck the edge of the curb and rolled down the street, avoiding pedestrians and cars with a series of uncanny dips and swerves, and vanished onto an entrance ramp to the eastbound interstate. Stunned by the loss of his familiar, yet at the same time understanding (perfectly) that this was a path to a solution, Eddie sprinted for his car. Three days of frantic investigation, of following dubious tips ("I seen somethin' bright rollin' along the shoulder west of Buffalo"), of ignoring the cynical reactions of truckdrivers ("You wanna earn a dollar, buddy, come on in the men's room"), led him to a Brooklyn dock where he learned that the dollar had been inadvertently kicked up the gangplank of the luxury liner *Cymbeline,* which was scheduled to leave within the hour on an extended Mediterranean cruise. After checking on the dollar—it was rolling back and forth in the aft luggage compartment, maintaining its pace by conforming to the slight rocking of the ship—Eddie settled into a tourist-class cabin and prepared himself mentally for a long and boring voyage.

Such, however, was not to be the case. Shortly after the ship weighed anchor, a beautiful young woman slipped through his door and lay down beside him on his bunk.

"I Think I Could Fall Madly In Bed With You," she said by way of openers.

Eddie could scarcely credit his good fortune. Eileen (this being the young woman's name) was more than beautiful; her looks might best be termed crowd-pleasing, for a crowd of would-be suitors scratched and pleaded at Eddie's door during the early part of the voyage. Her hair was long and dark—a darkness that seemed woven of the thousand shades of night—and her eyes held this same infinitude of color; her face was at once elfin and sensual, and her body willowy yet ripely curved. There was, in fact, only one drawback to Eileen's appearance—a T-shirt that bore the legend HUGGABLE and gave off a foul odor. The component particles of the T-shirt were Eileen's familiar, and she refused to impose randomnicity upon it by subjecting it to washing. In addition, she had grown so intimate with the shirt that its legend now acted as the prime directive of her behavior, and her speech consisted mainly of T-shirt slogans. For example, when she wanted to communicate her desire to make love to Eddie, she said, "When Sex Is Good It's Beautiful, But When It's Bad It's Still Pretty Good." And in reaction to Eddie's description of his mission on behalf of Jacob Vinograd, she said, "Only Those

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Who Attempt The Absurd Can Achieve The Impossible." Of her past she would only tell him that "I Used To Be A Realist Until I Got Mugged By Reality." This mode of speech proved contagious, and at one point, while attempting to convince her to remove the T-shirt (an unsuccessful attempt), he heard himself saying, "Courage Is The Ability To Let Go Of The Familiar."

Despite the triviality of Eileen's conversation, Eddie sensed about her a great depth and mysterious sadness, and as most earnest, ingenuous, doomed young men are inclined to do when confronted by such, he fell madly in love with both these qualities and with her. He saw that Jacob Vinograd's imperatives were no longer of real moment, that he had to solve the puzzle of the seriously comic world for Eileen's sake, to plumb her mystery and root out her sadness (something he metaphorically effected with passionate regularity). To verify his sense of her importance, he pushed through the crowd of tearful men choking the companionway and descended into the aft luggage compartment to commune with his dollar. Sure enough, the coin beamed thoughts that confirmed his judgment—Eileen's mystery was not only important but central to a solution. Eddie laid down dabs of silver polish in the dollar's back-and-forth track so that it could keep itself shiny, then returned to the cabin.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this," he told her. "And I won't rest until you're happy. Until we're happy together."

Eileen smiled sadly. "When The Going Gets Weird," she said, "The Weird Turn Pro."

o

On their seventh day out, as they were strolling through the corridors of first class (the captain had moved them from tourist class to ameliorate the chaos caused by the crowd of tearful men, who had been reduced to shouting protestations of love and tossing up roses, which blew away in the wind), they spotted two men kneeling beside a body from whose chest the hilt of a knife was protruding. Eddie drew his automatic and ordered the two men to stand against the wall; then he knelt beside the still-breathing victim just in time to hear that unfortunate whisper the word "muse." This was followed by a guttering rattle that signaled life's end. Eddie got to his feet, his heart full of loathing for the perpetrators, the shorter of whom—a pale, squat, beetle-browed man wearing a baggy gray suit—was mumbling in a foreign language.

"Okay," said Eddie. "Let's go have a talk with the captain."

"Now hang on, old spoon," said the taller of the men in an upper-crust British accent. "Nothing to get salty about, don't you know. We're innocent." He was a slender, aristocratic-looking fellow, dressed in evening clothes and carrying a gold-headed cane. Despite a natural prejudice against the rich, Eddie found his blithe manner appealing. "Allow me

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to introduce myself," the man went on. "I am Saunders Devane, and this"—he indicated the squat man with a graceful gesture—"this is . . ."

"Osip Kirilov," said the squat man in a tone of utter despondency. "I am but humble son of Mother Russia, a man of gray dreams and shabby expectations, of proletarian tastes and mean ambitions, of . . ."

"Enough already," said Eddie, for it seemed the Russian would go on endlessly with self-description; he turned to Eileen. "Why don't you wait in the stateroom? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"When You've Got Them By The Balls," said Eileen cryptically, a smile playing about her lips, "Their Hearts And Minds Will Follow." She stepped off along the corridor, leaving Eddie to wonder if she had been referring to their relationship or his interaction with the two men.

"Interesting girl," said Saunders Devane, wrinkling his nose and studying the swivel action of Eileen's hips. "A bit ripe, though, wouldn't you say?"

Still puzzled by Eileen's parting remark, Eddie responded in her vernacular. "U Toucha My Woman, I Breaka U Face," he said.

Saunders Devane frowned and said, "Quite."

"What's going on here?" asked Eddie.

"I see no point in persiflage." Saunders elbowed Osip. "Right, old soup tureen?"

Osip nodded glumly and stared at the carpet.

"I"—Saunders bowed—"am in the employ of Her Majesty's Secret Service, while Osip here is . . ."

"KGB," grumbled the Russian.

"And you," Saunders continued, "are the American detective Eddie Samples, whereas this poor creature"—he nudged the dead man with his toe—"was Paul Cluny of the Surete."

"So how'd he get to be 'was?' " asked Eddie.

"Suicide." Saunders held up a hand as if to ward off Eddie's sneer of disbelief. "I know, I know! Hard to swallow. But it's the gospel unadorned, old salad fork. The three of us were having a chat about our mutual enemy, when of a sudden Paul pulled out a knife and plunged it into his own chest."

Saunders' smile was disarming, and Eddie was inclined to accept his implausible explanation. "Mutual enemy?" he said. "Who might that be?"

Osip and Saunders exchanged startled glances. "Well," said Saunders, "you're obviously part of this, old butter knife, so I'm going to be candid. Have you ever heard of Dr. Cosimo Dark?"

"Sounds familiar," lied Eddie, not wanting to appear uninformed.

"Our organizations think it likely that Dark is at the bottom of all this (Eddie perked up at the phrase) relative gaiety that's pervaded our lives.

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Before his disappearance several years ago, it was rumored that he was devising a method of interacting with the micro-structures underlying reality, and chances are the bugger's succeeded." Saunders tapped the head of his cane against his palm. "I say, you didn't happen to catch old Paul's last words, did you?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Though quailed by having to deal with the British Secret Service and the KGB, Eddie was not about to be slickered. "Could be you heard something before I arrived. Why don't we trade?"

Saunders beamed at him approvingly. "Can't pull the wool over your eyes, can we, old saucepan?"

"Cairo," intoned Osip. "He say 'Cairo.' It is no place, I'm thinking, for son of poor ironworker with the grit of Moscow in his soul." He broke into a bassy humming that Eddie recognized to be "The Volga Boatman's Song."

Saunders winked at Eddie as if to ask his indulgence of Osip's maudlin behavior. "Your go, I believe," he said.

"Muse," said Eddie. "I don't know what it means, but that's what he said."

"Hmph." Saunders chewed his lower lip. "Curiouser and curiouser."

"Wait a second!" said Eddie. "If this Cluny was your friend, how come he killed himself before passing on his information?"

"My familiar"—Saunders flourished his cane—"has informed me that in this new order there are some things men are not meant to know. Apparently Paul's death is one such mystery."

Eddie did not doubt him, for he had himself perceived that a deeply flawed logic underlay the seriously comic world.

"My goodness!" Saunders glanced at his watch, alarmed. "Just look at the time. I'm afraid you'll have to pardon me, I've an . . ."

"Hold it." Eddie waggled his gun. "I want to keep an eye on you two. Either we work together on this or else I'm going to work on it alone . . . if you catch my drift."

"What a splendid idea!" Saunders draped an arm about Osip's shoulder. "International cooperation and all that. Good show! We'd be delighted."

They adjourned to Eddie's stateroom, ordered brandy and vodka from the steward, and proceeded to celebrate their partnership. Even Eileen got into the spirit of things; she went swiveling about the room, flirting with Osip and Saunders, making seductive statements such as "It's Not Pretty Being Easy" and "You Can't Be First, But You Can Be Next." Osip did not take his eyes off her, but Saunders paid her little attention and tried to fill Eddie in on the infamous Dr. Dark.

"Started out as a CPA," he told Eddie. "Which is no doubt where he acquired his taste for villainy. Then during the Sixties he fell in with evil companions. A woman, actually. A vile hippie priestess who plied

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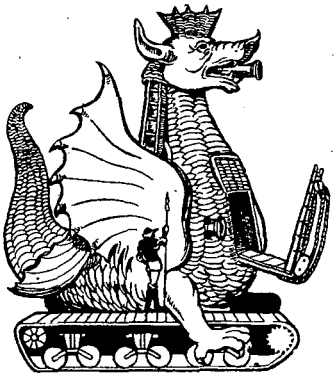

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him with hallucinogens and turned his interest to particle physics. Had one daughter by the woman. Estranged from him now. One of those . . ."

"Mother!" Osip interrupted Saunders with a bellow. He was slumped in an easy chair, cradling his familiar—a clod of black dirt—and holding a vodka bottle up for a toast. "To my blessed mother who lies deep in bosom of Mother Russia, eyeless, dreamless, never knowing the light touch of snowflake or lonely howl of Siberian Express or cheerful flicker of campfire from gulag." A sob racked his chest. He took a slug of vodka and launched into a dolorous song.

People walking past in the corridor heard the singing, mistook it for cries of pain, and offered their assistance. Before long a party was in progress, one that spilled out into the corridor and down the stairs to tourist class, where the crowd of tearful men were heartened by this vicarious proximity to the lovely Eileen and passed notes up the stairs in hopes of securing an audience with her. The party was a typical mixed bag of the seriously comic world. There was a woman whose familiar—a filling in her lower left incisor—picked up alien radio stations orbiting the earth; when Eddie put an ear to her mouth he heard a faint hissing gabble alternating with bursts of atonal whimpering. The captain, whose familiar was a post card from the San Diego Zoo, did animal impressions. Another ship's officer—his familiar being one of Elvis Presley's scarves—related anecdotes about the King, while a pair of identical girl twins, whose familiar happened to be an old Presley 45, sang "In The Ghetto" as a background. Watching all this *joie de vivre,* Eddie wondered if they were doing the right thing by tracking down Dr. Dark, for the seriously comic world seemed a vast improvement over the one that had preceded it. And, too, seeing how intimate these people had become with their familiars, he realized how inadequately developed was his relationship with the silver dollar. While he had acquired the coin's superficial characteristics—its soundness, the courage of the dead president (redolent of the image more than the reality)—he knew there was much left to acquire and he missed its companionship. Of course his situation was not nearly so severe as that of the ship's radio officer, whose familiar—an ice cube—had melted away before he had been able to get it to a refrigerator; he stood in a corner of the stateroom, gazing enviously at the others, and at one point Eddie overheard him whispering into a highball glass, asking the ice cubes if they had known his friend.

Later that night, the party still in full swing, Osip lurched up from his chair, crossed to the sofa where Eileen was sitting and fell to his knees before her. "You are most beautiful woman I ever see," he said. "Were it not for my great friend Eddie Samples, I would tell you what is in my heart, for it is a Russian heart that has known much sadness, much pain, and from the sadness in your eyes and your earthy odor, I

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can tell we are kindred souls." He blinked and swayed. "What you think of me?"

"I Used To Be Disgusted," said Eileen coldly. "Now I'm Just Amused."

Osip clutched both hands to his head as if her words had pierced his brain. "You are right to loathe me," he said. "For I am but pale, beetle-browed, slightly overweight albeit well-muscled grub of a man fit only for the work of bullock. But I swear I will change. Tell me what I must do to please you."

"Never Try To Teach A Pig To Sing," said Eileen with even more coldness. "It Wastes Your Time And Only Annoys The Pig."

Stunned by this exhibition of heartlessness, the rest of the party shuffled out the door, shaking their heads. Osip staggered to his feet, went to the porthole and stared grimly out through his opaque reflection at the inky sea. Saunders came up behind him and patted his shoulder, saying, "There, there, old tea service. Don't take it so hard." And Eddie, who—though he commiserated with Osip—had been inflamed with desire by Eileen's display of loyalty toward him, manuvered her into the bedroom and there nearly succeeded in removing her T-shirt.

With time out for matters of personal hygiene, the four of them spent the duration of the voyage in much these same positions.

Several days later the *Cymbeline* docked at Alexandria, and by means unknown Eddie's silver dollar managed to exit the aft luggage compartment and roll down the gangplank and out onto the Cairo road. Prior to this Eddie had kept the coin's existence a secret from the others, but now he made a clean breast of it and they set out after the dollar in a hired taxi, whose driver commented that Eileen smelled like "a ship of the desert" and insisted she sit in the rear. The pace set by the faithful coin was slow, and they grew swiftly bored with watching the monotonous landscape of dunes crawl by. To pass the time they played "Twenty Questions," a game from which Eileen was excluded due to her limited verbal capacity. Thereafter Saunders held forth on the Black Mountain School of poetry, taking exception to their insistence that content should define form as regards modern verse. Every now and then Osip, still embittered by Eileen's rejection, would mutter threats against Dr. Dark.

"I will crush him like gnat," he said. "For was not my country great before he worked dire spell? Had we not thousands of warhawks aimed at villainous US of A, and now are not these same warhawks painted over with counter-revolutionary Happy Faces and controlled by men who prefer decadent Paint-By-Numbers sets to noble proletarian aggression?" He growled. "I will pop him like grape."

In Cairo, in Tewfik Square, a beggar attempted to snatch up the dollar and his near miss sent it bouncing up the steps of the Egyptian mu-

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seum—a massive lion-colored building with thick columns and a Greek-style facade.

"Muse," said Saunders. "Poor Cluny." He cast a disapproving eye on Eddie. "If we'd known about your coin, old stew ladle, Paul might be here with us."

"I didn't even know you guys existed until after he was dead," said Eddie earnestly.

"I suppose not." Saunders sniffed. "Still, one might have surmised our existence."

Just inside the museum doors a rat seized the silver dollar in its jaws and scampered down the stairs leading to a pitch-dark basement.

"You wait here," Eddie told Eileen.

She nodded, thought a moment, then said, "I Like Your Approach, Now Let's See Your Departure." She shrugged to let him know that it was the only slogan she had even minimally associated with the circumstance, but he got the message. By way of assuring her as to his safety, he said, "I Don't Get Mad, I Get Even."

Guns drawn, Saunders' flashlight showing the way, they descended into the basement. The walls were lined with colossal statuary and cobwebbed sarcophagi, and as they were passing one of these latter, its lid creaked open and a decrepit voice said, "Hold-up-man's-instructions-to-helpless-strangers. Freeze! Hands up! Don't move or I'll blow you into spaghetti sauce!"

They dropped their guns, and on turning they saw a hunched old man with hippie-length gray hair emerging from the sarcophagus; he was wearing a top hat and cloak, and his eyes were as dark as Eileen's. He was carrying a huge revolver.

"Deranged laughter," said the old man. "Cackle, cackle. In-my-clutches-type-dialog."

Behind him, hovering in the depths of the sarcophagi, was a network of silver wires; they flashed and shimmered and appeared to be shifting about.

"All right, Dark," said Saunders. "What's going on here?"

"Villain's-wholly-unnecessary-explanation-to-protagonists," said Dr. Dark. He withdrew a scroll from his cloak and tossed it to Eddie, who unfurled it and read:

"You will never leave here alive so there's no harm in my telling you that what you see before you (at this point Dr. Dark cleared his throat to attract their attention and gestured toward the complex of silver wires) *are* The Fundamental Things, *the metaphorical strings by which one may pull the nature of reality into whatever shapes are possible. I have isolated them from the rest of the micro-structure and after painstaking trial-and-error have managed to change the world into a hap-*

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pier and more peaceful place. Hey, call me irresponsible! But aren't we better off than we were?"

Saunders struck a noble attitude. "Mankind must have free will in order to command his rightful place in the universe, Dark."

"I will snap you like twig," snarled Osip.

"Sorry, Doc," said Eddie. "But Jacob Vinograd has hired me to get to the bottom of all this and I have to honor my contract."

"Mad-scientist's-ravings-about-peace-at-any-price and my-work-misunderstood-by-fools-like-you," said Dark.

"Just When You Thought You Were Winning The Rat Race," said a sultry voice from the shadows, "Along Come Faster Rats."

Dark dropped his gun and turned. "I'm in the . . ." he said, or so it sounded to Eddie's ears.

Eileen stepped forward into the light shed by the silver wires; her gun was even larger than Dr. Dark's.

"Of course!" Saunders smacked his forehead. "Ayminda Dark. The missing daughter. But I thought you were somewhere lost in a Tibetan vastness."

"People Who Think They Know It All Are Especially Annoying To Those Of Us Who Do," came her reply.

"Eileen!" said Eddie. "Think of us, our future."

"You've Obviously Got Me Mistaken For Someone Who Cares," she sneered. Gesturing with her gun, she indicated that Eddie should bring her The Fundamental Things.

"Father-pleading-with-estranged-daughter-not-to-make-the-mistake-that-can-ruin-her-life," said Dr. Dark. "Don't do it, baby!"

"Looking Out For Number One," said Ayminda dispassionately; then, fixing her father with a disparaging look, she added, "My Parents Went To Miami Beach And All They Brought Me Was This Lousy T-Shirt."

Eddie reached into the sarcophagus and lifted The Fundamental Things; a shimmering feeling passed through his mind and flesh, and this so startled him that as he turned he dropped the little nest of silver wires. They fell to the floor with a faint clash. Horrified, Ayminda stooped to retrieve them. Eddie seized the opportunity and grabbed for her gun; but she twisted aside, clutching The Fundamental Things, and instead he snagged her T-shirt. The rotted garment came away in his hand. There was a unanimous gasp from the four men, for Ayminda Dark was possessed of as fine a set of jaloobies as were to be found this side of Dolly Parton. They stared after her as she fled jiggling up the stairs.

"We should follow her," said Eddie, feeling drained of energy, inutterably sad.

"Give me a moment, old beanpot," said Saunders in a choked voice; he switched off the flashlight.

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Eddie looked over at Dr. Dark. "Help us find her," he said.

"Old-man's-sudden-apprehension-of-hopelessness," said Dark. "I see it will be my fate to grieve everlastingly for the daughter who has betrayed me, to lose myself in the fleshpots of the Orient, perhaps to develop a taste for opium and young boys, and to wind up heartsick and broken on some brothel floor."

Without another word he wandered off among the sarcophagi, and in the pitiless darkness Osip began to weep.

Following the silver dollar, which the rat had let fall down the steps of the museum, Eddie and Saunders and Osip boarded a derelict freighter in Alexandria and booked passage for Istanbul. As the slow sea days went by, Eddie felt his devious, grasping self re-emerging and mingling with the earnest, ingenuous soul he had lately been; and, recalling that this feeling had begun the instant he had dropped The Fundamental Things, he knew that his clumsiness had altered the nature of reality, that the seriously comic world had met the same fate as the one preceding it. Consumed by guilt, he sought bizarre forms of penance. He took to gambling with the crew—a menagerie of burly, bearded men; he cheated them, and was humiliated and beaten. He drank oily gin and cursed Ayminda for her betrayal, cursed his own betrayal of Jacob Vinograd's trust. He engaged in a brief affair with a woman named Claire, who was in the habit of standing at the bow and staring into the sunset, her face tearful and shining, and who was given to interrupting their lovemaking with philosophical analyses of their malaise.

"Here we are," she told him once. "Joined flesh to flesh, our hearts pounding together, and yet those hearts belong to other places, other times. We are more alone than when we met, and this is just, for are we not all perpetrators of evil, pursuers of darkness, and do not our sins condemn us to this alienated condition? And yet in our joyless union do we not perceive joy more clearly by its absence, and is not this heated, bittersweet contact we share a metaphorical knife's edge upon which we must lie until we bleed dry, ignorant of each other though intimate, and is not this ignorant intimacy the crux of all human involvement, the thready pulse that empowers us to continue onward through a tragically romantic world?"

"No," said Eddie for the sake of argument, but he had to agree with Claire's description of the world.

Tragically romantic.

She had hit the nail on the head, for as he came to realize during the voyage and upon docking in Istanbul, life now consisted of haunted strangers drifting between tragedies, of lovelorn men and wronged women, of back-fence wars and pointless heroics, of exotic locales and

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scarred malefactors, of a general apprehension that some great beauty was fading from the world, its last flame unsteadily burning, and all kinds of stuff like that. Except for Eddie's silver dollar, which—its mission uncompleted—still embodied the energies of the seriously comic world, there were no more familiars. Mankind was truly alone. Eddie could scarcely summon the strength to follow the dollar as it rolled eastward across the Capodacean Plain, and his two companions were faring no better. Osip wept constantly, and Saunders' blithe manner had eroded. One evening while they were stopped to gas up their rented car in a tiny white village, he drew Eddie aside and said, "Got a confession to make, old fondue dish." His chin quivered and he stared off into the dying light. "You see, I'm not quite the man's man I pretend. Only happened once. An older boy and I, while the rest of the form was at a cricket match. Only once. Didn't really enjoy it much, but I can't say he forced me. Thought I'd wiped away the stain, but you never can, you know. The past won't die." He let out a shuddering sigh. "Tried all these years to make believe it hadn't happened. Can't any longer." He stiff-upper-lipped. "Won't blame you if you shun me. Not in the least."

Eddie could find no way to boost Saunders' spirits, and shortly thereafter the Englishman found an old woman in an Afghani village who volunteered to give him daily whippings and feed him nothing but raw mutton. He refused to leave her side. And shortly after that, Osip—in a paroxysm of tears—lumbered off into the desert, leaving as a trail a succession of quotes from Mayakovsky scratched on the cliffsides; the last of which read: "The universe sleeps, its paw curled upon a star-infested ear."

And so, gin bottle in hand, Eddie Samples drove on alone beneath glorious sunsets and across battle-scarred plains, shooting his way through the fringes of wars, falling in with evil companions and good, always encased in the memory of his terrible failure and tragic romance. He was a grim, embittered man, and he was no longer passionate in his pursuit of the silver dollar, which, propelled by grasping hands and kicks, squirted across Asia, fording rivers and passing through cities with miraculous facility, pausing now and then to give him a chance to eat and sleep. He had been scraped down to his own fundamental things, reduced to reflexes and a perception of his insignificance, his role as a pointilist dot drifting over the world's violent canvas. Broken-hearted, his moral fiber decayed to cobwebs, he kept going out of sheer stubbornness, the sort of empty willpower that possesses a man who knows that to stop moving means to die. In Bangkok he bought a slouch hat and trenchcoat to protect himself from the steamy monsoon rains, and there he also took up smoking, ostensibly in order to help drive off mosquitoes. He let the cigarettes dangle from his lip as he drove, and this habit left a yellow-

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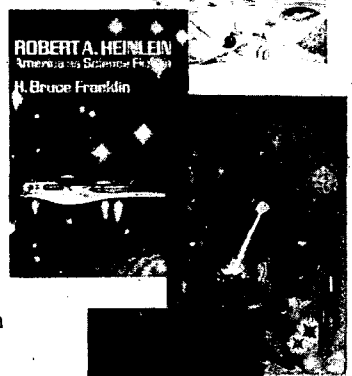

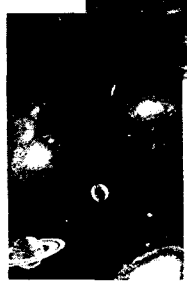

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brown stain that added to the hard-bitten, damaged look he was acquiring. At last he reached Peking where hundreds of other trench-coated men lurked in doorways, as hollow-cheeked and burning-eyed as was Eddie; where rain fell from a sky the color of those men's cigarette ashes; where slim girls in thigh-slit silk dresses stroked Persian cats and cozied up to old Mandarin gents; where death was in the air like the whisper of a playing card across green felt, and life was the least reliable form of currency. He trailed the silver dollar to the Street of Dreams—a place of pagoda roofs and houses delicate as crickets and a single flophouse that bore the name The Inn Of Inexhaustible Monotony. He checked into the flophouse and discovered that the dollar had somehow negotiated the stairs and was rolling around and around a depression in the floor of his room. He loosened his tie, settled back on the grungy mattress and proceeded to drink himself into a stupor. The next morning, eyes itchy, head throbbing, he stumbled to the window for a breath of air and there in the street below he spied Ayminda Dark. She was more beautiful than ever, and he wondered how he could have ever hated her, as he had all during his travels.

"That missy girl go belly-up chop-chop," said the flophouse owner in response to Eddie's inquiry. "Number one boom-boom."

And, indeed, as Eddie learned from further investigations along the street, Ayminda Dark would go with anyone—beggars, lepers, odious foreign tourists—and would perform with them the most depraved of acts, inclusive of number one boom-boom. Yet she came from these encounters radiant, as if by wallowing in the mire she were washing the grime from her soul and allowing its radiance to shine through; this radiance seemed to afford her a measure of protection, for witnesses claimed that as her glow became more pronounced, the clots of offal flung at her by children missed with increasing frequency, and so she walked the Street of Dreams stainless, unmindful of the missiles that veered around her and splattered the ornate facades. Eddie could not fathom why she had let herself fall to such a state until he entered into conversation with an old white-bearded expatriate, who passed his days in the teahouse of the inn, nodding out, inhaling the strange gray fogs that coiled through the windows and brought the dreams that gave the street its name.

"The lady works for Fow Lung," said the old man. "Hell, he owns her."

"Who's Fow Lung?" asked Eddie.

"Leader of the Green Dragon Triad. Vice-lord." The old man closed one nostril with his forefinger and tooted a streamer of mist that wafted by; he stared thoughtfully at the shotgun propped against the table, then picked up a pen and scrawled a few words on a note pad. By cocking his head Eddie saw that the words were "grace under pressure." Fow Lung,

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the old man went on to explain, sent Ayminda out every morning to copulate with the dregs of Peking, and when she returned at dusk he would have her himself, thus gratifying his perverted desire to be the last each day to worship at the temple of her body; since Fow Lung weighed only slightly less than the *Queen Mary* and resembled in shape and coloration a gibbous autumn moon, the old man did not believe that Ayminda had volunteered for this duty and suggested that the vice-lord must have some sort of hold over her. Eddie asked him if he had any knowledge of The Fundamental Things, but at that moment a billow of fog swirled about the old man's head and thereafter he would speak of nothing but fishing.

Eddie walked away from the inn with his hat tipped down over his eyes, a cigarette dangling from his lips, and a gin bottle protruding from the pocket of his trenchcoat. Night had fallen; an eyebrow-thin crescent moon hung above a pagoda roof. How could you figure it? he thought. Some bimbo breaks your heart in three places, you chase her across two continents, and when you finally track her down you wind up having to save her from a fate worse than death. It made no sense, but a guy had to do what he had to do. Because no matter which world it was, seriously comic or tragically romantic or whatever, it was the same old story—you searched for love, for glory, and as time went by you learned that The Fundamental Things applied and free will was not an option. Eddie dropped his cigarette into a mud puddle; a streamer of fog wisped up and arrowed off toward the inn. He hoped it would bring the old man a good dream. The old man was wise, and if you were wise you needed a good dream or two to get you through the accompanying depression. Eddie pulled out his automatic and checked the clip. He caught sight of his reflection in the puddle—it looked dangerous. Gaunt and feverish, yet with a hint of compassion about the mouth. He lit another smoke to hide that sign of weakness and set out for the house of Fow Lung.

The first part was a snap. He hurtled through a ricepaper screen into a foyer, where half a dozen or so of Fow Lung's minions were torturing a peasant girl. Bullets flowed from his automatic, pinpointing Chinese skulls and hearts, splattering bloody ideographs on the walls behind them. He accepted the peasant girl's thanks, told her to scram and moved on into a courtyard centered by an ornamental pond. There a lithe, catlike young Chinese man was waiting. Eddie fired twice, and the young man plucked the bullets from the air and smiled. A nasty, "gotcha," smile.

"Special kung fu!" cried Eddie, aghast.

The young man's mouth worked in a series of complex movements, but the only words that came out were "You betcha." He began a slow creep around Eddie, slashing his hands through the air and making it hiss, giving eerie animal cries. It looked like curtains, but as the young man

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started to leap at Eddie, the silver dollar rolled in from the foyer and tripped him up; he spun head over heels and landed with a splash in the ornamental pond. Eddie peered in after him. The young man was still smiling, but it was the kind of smile that lasted forever. Carp were nuzzling his cheeks.

Beyond the courtyard was the main house, and from behind a sliding door Eddie heard an obscene grunting. He slid back the door, and the silver dollar rolled in ahead of him. At first Eddie did not understand what he was seeing—an immense blob of squirmy yellow, and two tiny white things wiggling feebly on either side of it. Then this resolved into the figure of a fat, bald man with stubby arms and legs and dimpled buttocks. Fow Lung. The tiny white things were feet, all that was visible of Ayminda Dark. Eddie kicked the blob, eliciting a shriek. Fow Lung flopped onto his side, thereby revealing Ayminda's radiant nudity. Momentarily blinded, Eddie had to shield his eyes, and this allowed Fow Lung to (in a single fluid motion) cover himself with a red silk robe and remove from a small chest the glittering silver complex of The Fundamental Things.

"Drop it!" snapped Fow Lung. "Or I'll destroy the world!" He lifted The Fundamental Things overhead. His little black currant eyes were sunk in folds of flesh, looking like two flies that had landed on a hefty helping of butterscotch pudding.

Playing it cool, Eddie took the gin bottle from his pocket, had a slug, then passed it to Ayminda, thinking a drink might get her circulation going once again. She stared at him with radiant devotion. "I'm Not Into Booze," she said softly. "It Dulls The Drugs."

Eddie was delighted that the tragically romantic world had not wiped out her unique verbal style; it was one of her most endearing characteristics. He turned back to the vice-lord. "Put those Things down slow, or I'll open you up like a can of V-8."

"Ayminda," said Fow Lung. "Who is this American pig?"

"Never Attribute Anything To Malice That Can Be Adequately Explained By Stupidity," she said, staring at Eddie with—despite her words—an adoring intensity.

"Ah," said Fow Lung. "Eddie Samples. I should have guessed."

"Put 'em down," repeated Eddie. "Slow."

"Fool!" Fow Lung spat; a runner of saliva clung to his chin, then slimed to the floor, greasing a path for the silver dollar, which was beginning to wobble. "If I let them fall, the results will not be pleasant. You see"—he chortled—"your clumsiness in the museum damaged The Fundamental Things. Only two alternatives are left mankind, neither of them desirable. Firstly, the fantastically mysterious world, in which there is great beauty but even greater evil. And secondly"—he shuddered—"the world

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of the desperately commonplace, wherein it will be Ayminda's fate to return to the United States and become the wife of a college professor in some drab midwestern cultural oasis, there to endure a bland yet comfortable existence, collecting unfinished furniture and deriving a mild pleasure from *haute cuisine,* seeing herself in relation to her husband much as Ingrid Bergman saw herself in relation to Paul Henreid in that wonderful American film, *Casablanca.*" Again he shuddered. "Were I to let you touch The Fundamental Things, you would feel the truth of what I say. But if you doubt me, consider the fact that neither Ayminda nor I have chosen to manipulate reality."

"Is it true?" Eddie asked Ayminda.

"Would This Body Lie To You?" she said, her face bright with the purity of love.

Eddie inspected the body closely and decided that not only was it incapable of falsehood but that it presented several aspects of the truth that he had previously failed to notice. It was a hard choice. The present was untenable, and he did not care for the sound of either alternative. If he shot Fow Lung, then maybe, just maybe, it would be thefantastically mysterious world that evolved. And maybe he could handle it. He was terrified of the desperately commonplace, of Ayminda ending up in an empty, adventureless world of shopping malls and faculty parties and another man's arms. Yet he really had no choice. The troubles of two (three, if you counted the college professor) little people didn't amount to a hill of beans in this tragically romantic world.

"Okay, China boy," he said. "Suck on this!" He opened up Fow Lung with three rounds to the belly, and the vice-lord flew backward through a ricepaper wall; but as he flew he heaved The Fundamental Things down onto the floor. Nothing happened. Eddie peered into the next room just in time to see the huge yellow bulk quiver its last. "Well," he said, turning to Ayminda. "I guess . . ." He broke off, horrified. The blackness of Ayminda's eyes had grown absolute, and flames were dancing on her fingertips. She laughed—a humorless, sodden laugh. Eddie sprang for The Fundamental Things, picked them up and once again smashed them to the floor. Ayminda's eyes returned to normal, and the flames on her fingertips died. There was a *plink* behind him, and Eddie knew without looking that the silver dollar had finally come up Tails, You Lose, for himself, Ayminda, and the rest of humanity. He tried not to think about it.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Ayminda shrugged. "When All Else Fails," she said, "Lower Your Standards."

He understood what she meant. All around him he could feel the chintzy textures of the desperately commonplace. Even her nudity

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seemed less radiant, and though he could still detect love in her face, her expression was thoughtful and subdued, and she did not shower him with grateful kisses as—back in the tragically romantic world—she might have. After she had dressed, he took her hand and led her into the foyer, where the peasant girl had laid the bodies out in a neat row and was busy sweeping up. He peeked into the street. Everything was the same, except that several workmen were erecting a sign above The Inn of Inexhaustible Monotony, which—Eddie realized in a burst of linguistic intuition—promoted the virtues of birth control.

"It doesn't look so bad," he said.

Ayminda gave no reply, and he assumed she was having trouble coming up with a suitable slogan. But when he turned around, she was gone.

As he wandered through the desperately commonplace world, having constantly to resist the impulse to return to the United States and enter the insurance business, Eddie began to comprehend Fow Lung's revulsion at the prospect of this particular alternative. It much resembled the world in which adventures had had their origin, differing in that the edge seemed to have been taken off experience. Food had lost a *soupçon* of savoriness, carbonated drinks no long fizzed as effervescently as once they had, and good weight was always an ounce light. Night and day were less distinct, and the zip had gone out of romance. Life had been reduced to the plodding necessities, a circumstance that caused even the slightest problem to appear a hopeless conundrum. And yet, though he knew The Fundamental Things could no longer be applied, Eddie could not banish hope. Hope that he and Ayminda Dark would one day find each other again, that this world he had helped to create (dull, nagging guilt) could somehow be changed. He considered hunting up Ayminda, asking her to leave her bland, comfortable existence; he would have traded all his commonplace moments to hear her whisper "How Can I Love You When You Won't Lie Down" or "Detectives Do It With Their Pistols Cocked." But what could he offer her? Only more of the same. Eddie, too, had lost his edge.

For a while he worked in a Taiwanese toy factory, overseeing the packaging of switchblade combs; he could hardly believe that this routine work held his interest—but it did. He improved the factory's efficiency to the point that management was able to cut their labor force by nearly one fourth, and his zeal attracted the notice of a visiting Christian businessman, who offered him a management trainee position in the accounting department of his religious ikon factory in Manila. Having no better prospects, Eddie accepted. He moved to the Phillipines, and there established a relationship with an Australian woman, who—though sexually exuberant—spent most of her time reminiscing about her teenage

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years, which had mainly consisted of lying around in empty irrigation ditches and drinking lemon Smoothies. A year passed. Two. In a fit of remorse he sent Jacob Vinograd a letter apologizing for the mess he had made of the assignment; Jacob cabled back, "DON'T BE SILLY STOP CARLA NOW AVON LADY STOP MY HANDICAP DOWN TO TWELVE STOP WHO COULD ASK FOR ANYTHING MORE STOP DON'T BE SUCH A STRANGER STOP."

With the passage of time and the further concretization of the desperately commonplace, Eddie's original devious nature came more and more to the fore. He began to covet the job of department head, then held by a crabby old man with a gray crewcut, who customarily wore three-piece suits and sunglasses and never spoke except to grunt when dropping papers on Eddie's desk. He took to following the old man home after work, hoping to catch him at some prurient activity that would cause his dismissal. But the old man's sole fleshly sin involved the bi-weekly visits of a prostitute to his apartment, and this—being commonplace—did not constitute sufficient grounds. Then, one evening as Edddie was lurking outside the apartment, which was situated on the second floor of a night club, where an untalented black American woman was wont to sing off-key blues songs to groups of bored tourists, he overheard the old man calling out to the prostitute as she left.

"Old-man's-gratitude-to-young-woman-for-sexual-favors," he said. "Bye now."

This inimitable verbal style electrified Eddie. Had his intellect dwindled to the point that he had failed to recognize Dr. Dark? Apparently so. As soon as the lights in the second-floor window went out, he crept up the stairs, jimmied the door, and sneaked into the shadowed living room. Someone was humming in the bedroom, and the only other sound was the warped voice of the blues singer from the night club below. Eddie's heart was full of murderous intent, because he had quite suddenly and irrationally transferred all blame for the desperately commonplace to the shoulders of Dr. Dark. He drew his automatic and edged into the bedroom. The old man was leaning over a steamer trunk from which a flickering golden light arose, and he was doing something inside it with his hands.

"Okay, Dark," said Eddie. "Put 'em up!"

Dark half-turned but did not remove his hands from the trunk. "Senior-citizen's-fearful-reaction-to-unknown-intruder," he said. "Who are you? What do you want? Don't hurt me!"

"Don't you remember me?" Eddie fingered out a smoke from his shirt pocket and lit up—a tragically romantic habit he had not been able to break. "Cairo. The Egyptian Museum. The seriously comic world. That ring a bell?"

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"Recognition-of-old-nemesis-leads-to-exclamation-of-surprise-and-bewilderment," said Dark. "My God!"

"I said put 'em up!" Eddie sighted toward Dark's alarmed face. The old man cautiously withdrew one of his hands and raised it over his head. "Both of 'em," said Eddie.

Dark shook his head in the negative.

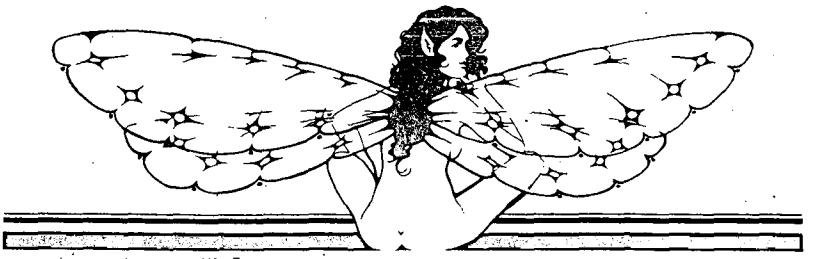
"Don't think I won't shoot." Eddie moved closer and jammed the gun into Dark's ribs.

"Potential-victim's-plea-to-deranged-and-violent-person," said Dark. "Please don't disturb me! I'm in the midst of a very delicate operation that involves the fate of humanity."

"The Fundamental Things have been damaged beyond repair, Dark," said Eddie, his desperately commonplace intelligence neglecting to take into account the flickering light. "Your villainy is at an end."

He grabbed Dark's arm and tried to drag him away from the trunk, but the old man hung on with a strength born of panic and managed to swing Eddie around so that he had a glimpse inside the trunk—Dark's hand was inextricably tangled in a boil of blackness and golden fire. The singer in the club below launched into the opening verse of "All Or Nothing At All," and, transmitted through his contact with Dark, Eddie felt a shimmering in his mind and flesh, a rush of feeling that swept between the rapturously fulfilling and the horrifyingly empty.

"For God's sake!" screeched Dark without categorical preamble as they teetered there, struggling, both on the verge of falling into the trunk. "Don't you see? The Fundamental Things may no longer apply, but I've finally gotten down to The Basics!"



NEXT ISSUE

Our August cover story, "The Gorgon Field," is an enigmatic mystery by Kate Wilhelm. We'll also have a hilarious novella, "World War Last," by Norman Spinrad and another of Isaac Asimov's amusing George and Azazel stories. You won't want to miss these and our other fine tales, so pick up your copy July 2, 1985.

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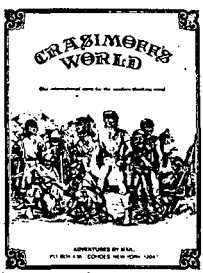
Complete Rules Package costs $5.00. Starter Package costs $17.00 and includes rules package, set-up, and two turns.

CRASIMOFF'S WORLD



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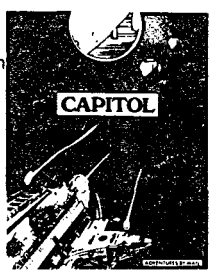
CAPITOL



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by Ian McDonald

art: J.K. Potter

SCENES FROM A SHADOW PLAY

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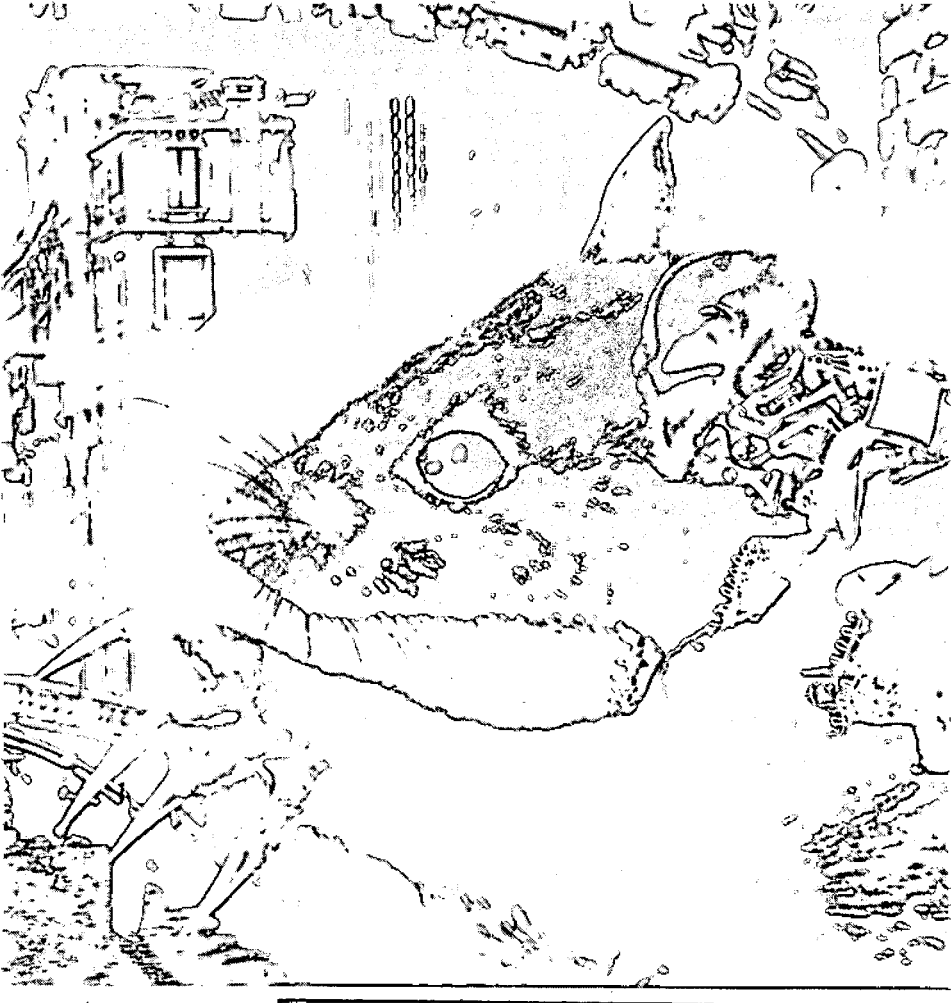

Ian McDonald is currently at work on a novel for Bantam Books which takes place a little earlier in the same future as "The Catharine Wheel" (*IAsfm*, Jan. 1984). The following story is set in the fascinating "City of Man" where decadence and opulence prevail, and where, as usual, one must beware the little shop hidden in the darkest neighborhood.

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Oh, but the Infanta Serenade is graceful and the Infanta Serenade is fair and when Dom Perellen sees her descending the grand staircase on the arm of the host, his ex-patron, the night of the pageant at the House Merreveth, he knows someone will have to die. For only two weeks previously his had been the arm she had taken descending his grand staircase to greet his guests, his the halls which had rung to her gay golden laughter, his the divan she had graced with her long, languid, huntress's limbs. Fury rising in his gorge like bitter bile, Dom Perellen departs from the ball as early as propriety permits and orders his gondola to return him home without delay or detour. He sits like a dull cold stone, wrapped in his mantle and street mask as the boat steals down dark canals lined with yellow-windowed walls and under low bridges. Deafened by the imagined laughter of Dom Merreveth and all the Gracious Castes of the city, he cannot hear the desperate playing of the ensemble of mechanicals in the bow (a selection of his own most celebrated quintets, no less) nor the terrible distant cries of the ragers as night's madness claims them again, nor the erosive slop of dark water against the stones of the City of Man. Without his knowing the chill of autumn rises like fog from Elder Sea and steals through his street-gown into his soul. Upon arrival at the House Perellen he locks himself in the music room and meets his servitors' well-intentioned inquiries with a tantrum of temper that sends both human and mechanical scurrying for their quarters.

From the walls of the music room portraits of the Doms and Infantas of the House Perellen, separated forever by a long, narrow strip of parquet floor, gaze upwards into the tinkling chandeliers, or wistfully towards the great oriel window with its commanding views of the Grand Canal and the Lagoon beyond. On a dais beneath this window stands the current Dom Perellen, thirty-fifth of his line, looking out towards the unseen sea. For a long time he stands thus and the retinue of the House hush each other in their duties and wait. Then as the uncounted campaniles and carillons of the City of Man ring out the Third Hour he turns to the device beside him. This is the Instrument, the wonderful contrivance of keys and stops, tabs and levers (capable of the faithful mimicry of any sound animate or inanimate) upon which he creates his compositions. Seating himself before the complex manuals, he touches a key here, a tab there and swells the long room with music. He plays for many hours, filling the House with towering tocatas of dizzying virtuosity, intricate fugues, and moody sonatas until at dawn he emerges, his fury spent, and announces to his household that all is well, he will retire to his rooms for a short rest. As the doors close behind him the servitors all notice that the portraits of the Exalted Ancestors Beneath the Sea seem to be smiling the same smile.

* * *

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Now we see a strange thing, for, since those of the Gracious Castes seldom visit those older parts of the city given over to the commonality and artisiers, there is a certain unseemliness in Dom Perellen's stealthy passage down branching waterways which grow increasingly narrow and overshadowed by crumbling mansions. Slipping past sludge-boats and fishing-cogs, between the baroque barges of the transtellar merchants and the vigilant dark launches of the St. Charl Guards, he comes upon a quiet, deserted water-alley enclosed by sheer walls of iron balconies and peeling wooden shutters, and overhung by the pale banners of fresh laundry. At the water-steps of St. Audeon's Place he leaves his gondola and proceeds with two wardens (one fleshly, one mechanical) into the labyrinth of lanes and entries where he finds a place he knows well but has never seen.

"*Brothers Ho,*" says the sign above the door, "*Importers and Purveyors of Exotic Creatures: Taxidermists.*" Behind the latticed window a patchy stuffed padishant bows and curtseys to the passers-by. Kittens in pinafores caper about a table in parody of a nursery tea-party, birds sing and display, gorgodrills rise up upon their hind legs and open their ruffs, fritillaries flitter and fret and the imported exotics lurk within their protective glass environments.

"Lo, Brothers Ho," whispers Dom Perellen, "a moment of your time for a dear sibling; a favor given, a favor taken?" The door pays no heed. There are no sounds of motion from within. "Lo, siblings, if you will not open the door to your dear brother, will you open it to good custom?" After a long time oiled bolts are drawn back and the door opens. As quick as thought Dom Perellen is through it. He finds himself in a well-appointed parlor, low-ceilinged, and lit by warm yellow gas-light. Every available inch of wall space is taken by some stuffed and mounted creature, every part of the cosy room scrutinized by their black glass eyeballs. Behind him the window display performs its mechanical pantomime for the amusement of the lanes and alleys. Before him stand two men, tall for the artisan castes, dissimilar in age but in every other way as alike as peas in a pod.

"Which are you?" asks Dom Perellen. Both men answer together, "We are Adam Beth and Adam He," which is no answer at all. "So few?" asks Dom Perellen. One of the brothers shrugs, the other replies, "Brother Adam Zain is in the workshop, patron, the other four brothers are out among the Known Worlds procuring stock, thanks entirely to your continued patronage, Grace, in obtaining visas for us."

"It was the least I could do. We look after our own, even the discredited sons of our father. But I have some business for you; a matter of some delicacy which demands your particular skills and customary discretion. Now, if I may make myself comfortable?" Chagrined by their lapse of

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common etiquette, one of the brothers hurries to make tea while the other takes Dom Perellen's mantle and street mask. It is then that we see that the faces of Dom Perellen and Adam Ho are like one facereflected in a mirror. After tea has been served Dom Perellen leans forward confidentially across the low table. The swiveling glass eyes of the stuffed animals follow every motion from their high perches.

"I want someone killed." The Ho brothers smile politely.

"Go to the assassins, patron. Employ them. Our business is not in death of that manner."

"Where is the artistry in employing assassins? Where is the personal sense of satisfaction? It is like paying to hear someone else's sonatas, there is no satisfaction in the dry notification of a contract fulfilled, I must engineer it myself. It must be my own work, my own composition, my own personal vengeance."

"Ah, so it is the Dom Merreveth then, patron."

"You've heard?"

"All the city has heard of your discomfiture, patron. Alas, woman is as fickle and independent as . . ."

"You dare!"

"Apologies, apologies, patron, we presume too much on our kinship."

"This 'kinship' is too slender a thing by far to give you any right to gossip about the Gracious Castes. Consider this, you have a business and a respected name among all castes of the city, although you have had to relinquish your gracious name and take a common appellation. How many other disinherited clones can claim such favorable treatment? Nobler families than the Perellens have sold their engineered sons and daughters to the licensed mendicants and seraglios."

"Nobler families than the Perellens would not perhaps have required seven attempts."

"Enough. I am not responsible for our father's whims. He wished his heir to be a composer, he cloned new sons until he had his composer, and heir. Need I remind you that under the new law there may be only one legal claimant to any genotype? You live under sufferance and my good favor. Now, my dealings with the House Merreveth. I want to hear your suggestions for a fine present for the gracious Dom as an apology for my behavior at his pageant."

From a high shelf the Ho brothers (who we now see to be more than brothers, yet less) bring leather-bound volumes of sample books and a small imager which they use to display their wares to Dom Perellen. They show him wheeled gyropeds from the lava plains of Faffeny, helicoptera from the crystal forests of Chrios, fire-dwelling pyrogenes that seem to be mere lumps of dull stone until the moment they unfold in a blossom of flame, elegant, priceless agapanthas from Hannad, monstrous

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ranjas from the mountains of Ninn, gooseberry-green vegemorphs that derive their motive power from sunlight and water, singing choirs of angels no larger than the palm of his hand, flocks of fritillaries on chains of silver filigree: he sees grampus, oliphaunt, kraken and werwulf, fur and feather, fang and fire. The imported exotica of a dozen worlds do not impress Dom Perellen.

"Something more homely," he says. "The gentle Dom is a home-loving, fatherly man." So again the books open and the imager displays: hunting trophies of every conceivable species that can be followed with fowling-piece, cross-bow or light-lance, strange near-human creatures from the forgotten quarters of the city, dumb-waiters and mechanical tray-boys in the shapes of gallimaufs and padishants, diorama cases of prehistorical beasts from inconceivably remote epochs, humorous novelty collages assembled from diverse pieces of reptiles, birds, fishes and mammals, mounted grotesques, like the two-headed kitten and the pair of Siamese-twin calves, collections of insects, birds, and small mammals, amusing novelty automata . . . Here Dom Perellen stops them and exclaims, "The very thing!"

"What, patron, the House Mouse Family?"

"Precisely, citizen. The Dom Merreveth may be doubtful of a gift to himself from me, and rightly so, for I'll grant him a certain shrewdness, but a gift to his dear children could not possibly be suspect. And what could be more innocent, what better to delight a child's eye, than this little family of mice? How quickly can you have a set ready?"

"Four days, patron?"

"Three?"

"It could be done, but not easily. The minutiae of detail, patron; we pride ourselves that our automata are indistinguishable from life."

"Your import licenses are due to expire shortly. I can arrange for another half-year's extension."

"Thank you patron, but we live in difficult and trying times. Despite the quarantine and the best efforts of the St. Charl Guard not a night passes without the shrieks of the ragers, the carniphages, crying from our rooftops, nor a morning breaks without some new poor victim having fallen to them."

"You are vulnerable, I understand. I shall have one of my personal wardens remain to guard your workshop by night."

"Thank you Grace, but for the books . . ."

"Ah yes, the books must balance, the gentlemen of the exchequer never sleep. You will be paid fairly for your work, never fear. It is the least I can do for my unfortunate brothers. Now: the automata; there are a few minor modifications I wish you to make."

* * *

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Now it is noon, for the carillons of St. Maikannen's Chantry have rung out the Thirteenth Hour, and in the plaza beneath the bell-keep Dom Perellen takes wine with a few intimate friends from his circle of artists and aesthetes. They drink and laugh and stretch their elegant limbs in the weak autumn sunshine and exchange morsels of malicious gossip. But there is little pleasure in raillery for Dom Perellen for he knows that at other tables in other plazas other young bucks are lampooning and laughing at him.

Later they visit the Govannon Academy and fall in with a group of five young gracious women, come like them to view the paintings. Dom Perellen drops a two forent tip to the human chaperone and his friends distract the mechanical conscience for the few moments necessary for him to slip aside with the Infanta Phaedra on the pretext of showing her the exhibition. Later, at the House Perellen, he will entertain her with some short sonatas. On their return from the Academy, with the campaniles sounding Nineteen o'clock and the starlings flocking and swooping about the spire of St. Severyn's Cathedral, they are diverted from their course by the St. Charl Guards who have cordoned off an area surrounding a disused trading-factor's warehouse.

"Ragers, Graces," says the fat perimeter-sergeant, "carniphages. Traced a chapter of 'em to this 'ere building. Soon have 'em smoked out. That's what you've got to do, Graces, burn out the Plague."

The Infanta Phaedra presses closer for reassurance and Dom Perellen commands his mechanical quintet to play and quench the sound of the screams. The little boat moves on. Behind it the sun-forged blue-blades of the laser-lances cauterize the alien infection. Soon the cries are lost, and all that can be heard is the gentle lilting of the music and the lap of dark water under the bow as the ebbing tide draws them down the confluence of conduits and channels towards Elder Sea.

Dawn finds Dom Perellen gazing into the ceiling. Confusing ripple-reflections move across plaster-work cherubs and peacocks. The Infanta Phaedra stirs contentedly in her sleep but Dom Perellen does not hear her, for he is far away in the passages of his mind. Dawn is the hour when the death-white corpse-boats slip from their moorings behind the Hall of Weeping and steal away into the sunrise to the funeral grounds. Only the gravely smiling boatmen who crew the water-hearses know the latitude and longitude of the funeral grounds, but in his imagination Dom Perellen can see them slipping the weighted coffins over the stern into fog-shrouded Elder Sea. For this is the vision that haunts him, a corpse-boat making its slow, cold passage across the bar into Elder Sea. Between the somber, upright figures of the boatmen is a white coffin bearing the crest of a gracious family that is unfamiliar to him. He sees

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the coffin sinking into the clean cold water without even a ripple, sinking with today's company of bakers and butchers and lawyers and priests, merchants and traders and lowly play-actors, poets and painters and wise men and fools. The citizens of the City of Man fall through the water to stand side by side in serried ranks of grace and grovelor, a submarine army waiting at attention on the silt and sediment of centuries for the fanfares of the Pantochrist on the Dawn of Resurrection when all will be summoned to the rising Land of Gold. The coffin rests in the blessed company of the Ancestors Beneath the Sea, the ancestors whose faces line the walls of the music room. It disturbs Dom Perellen that he cannot recognize the armorial crest upon the sunken coffin.

For two further mornings this vision is to come to him. He lies alone under the startled scrutiny of cherubs on clouds and virgins pursued by stags, for his vengeful intensity has disturbed the Infanta Phaedra so much that she will not consent to any further nights with him. "Like poison," she describes it, "like a venom working behind the eyes." Dom Perellen shrugs and returns to the elaborate drawing out of his revenge. There is no doubt in his mind that the unidentified coffin is that of his enemy.

Just before noon on the second day the pneumatique delivers a message cylinder to his office. It states quite simply, *"Work completed, awaiting your Grace's disposal. Respectfully, Adam Ho."* In reply Dom Perellen gathers together four important pieces of paper: a Mercantile Letter of Credit for the sum of five hundred forents, an importation permiso from the Port Wardens, valid for a period of five months, precise instructions on the delivery of the automata collection, and an accompanying letter to the Dom Merreveth in which Dom Perellen extends his apologies to his one-time patron for having been out-of-sorts at the pageant and begs, for the sake of old times, that the good Dom overlook his breach of etiquette by accepting this humble gift to his children. He places the documents in an empty cylinder, addresses it, drops it into the slot and thinks nothing more about it. While the cylinder crosses beneath the city, he amuses himself by composing a set of complex improvisations about a simple, repetitive theme. It amuses him for the remainder of the afternoon.

Now the picture changes again, and we are in a great house of grand halls and spacious galleries. Portraits of ancestors line its walls and the slow lap of water wears away at its stones, grain by grain, undermining the centuries. This is the House Merreveth, and we are in the nursery. Three children sleep by the glow of watch-candles, their faces folded to the pillows in the simple dreams of childhood, nannies no more than a whisper away. It has been a good day; new toys to play with, a present

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from a friend of Papa's, a gift to make even the most blasé of aristocrat's children gasp in delight. A family of mice, perfect in every detail: Grandpa in nightshirt with pipe, Grandma with her glasses and knitting, Mama and Papa Mouse, Mama in apron and mop hat, Papa in working bib-and-braces, and the three children in their neat little school uniforms. But more wonderful still, by repeating a magic word whispered to them by a tall, soft-spoken artisier in a street-mask, the tiny diorama comes to life. Mama sews and Papa saws, Grandpa puffs his pipe, Grandma knits and rocks her tiny rocking chair and the children scamper about playing Chase and Blind-Man's-Buff, tiny mouse voices squeaking.

The adventures of the mouse family entertain the children until bedtime and now the minute, intricate automata lie where play has left them, transfixed by slats of moonlight beaming through the nursery shutters. Then two tiny ears prick upright in the moonlight. And two more, and two more, and two tiny red eyes blink open, and a tail twitches. From the frozen postures of abandoned games the mice stretch into animation. They seem almost alive, scurrying across the nursery floor and under the door, but they are no more than precise mechanisms dressed in flensed mouse-skins. It is the boast of the Ho brothers that their creations cannot be distinguished from reality. By the secret run-ways and traverses known only to living mice they move through the sleeping House, to mice, as vast and varied in its terrain as the City of Man to men. In time they come to the Dom's bedroom. From behind a plasterwork rose on the coping they absorb the scene with pink sensor eyes.

The Dom Merreveth sleeps alone: this is well known among the Gracious Houses, for the Dom's attraction to women lies in his potency in the public world of the arts and commerce rather than the private world of the quilts. The children dreaming in the moonlit nursery are his only in so far that he donated the culture cells to the genetic surgeons. All this is well, the plan hinges upon his solitary nature. No harm must be done to the Infanta Serenade. The Dom tosses and turns in the restless dreams of the powerful. The mice scamper unheard and unseen across the carpet, and up the carved legs of the divan. They stand for a moment on the pillow by the Dom's head; Grandma, Grandpa with his pipe, Mama in her little apron and Papa in his dungarees, the children smart and neat in their miniature pinafores. They move to their programmed positions. Then on some silent order they flex their tiny soft paws and steel blades spring out. With surgical precision they slice open Dom Merreveth's throat and wrists.

By the time the servitors have rushed to answer the strange, croaking, flapping cry from the Grace's bedroom the toy mice have frozen into position once again, ready for another day's merry play.

* * *

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The Chant Valedictory of the High Requiem dies away in the airy clerestories of the Hall of Weeping and the fog rolls in across the square like a breaking wave. In their white funeral gowns the small groups of mourners seem as insubstantial as ghosts. They are deathly silent as the fog muffles even their footfalls and respectful whispers. Above their heads, unseen in the fog, vast powers are moving: the seraphs of the Pantochrist, risen from Elder Sea in a cloud of mystery to descend upon the City Imperishable and summon the soul of a dead Dom to the company of the people beneath the sea.

The small group of young graces part at the water-steps where their boats await them.

"Such a shock to lose your exemplar so suddenly, Perellen," says Dom Gerrever, the poet.

"Ex-exemplar, citizen, I have not had dealings with the Dom for almost a year. But he did embark me upon my musical career, and I owe him thanks for that. I am sorry he's gone."

"Oh come now Perellen," says Dom Harshadden, the playwright, "You couldn't stand the man, he cheated you, slighted you, and humiliated you every chance he could. I'll wager you're glad to see him gone. And at such an opportune time too."

"I would not wish an end like upon even my worst enemy," says Dom Perellen, suddenly accused and guilty behind his mask. "He may have slighted me, and we have certainly had our differences in the past, but we are not men who murder on matters of shadowplay, are we?" There are murmurs of consent but Dom Hemmenveth the painter says,

"Who said anything about Dom Merreveth having been murdered?"

"Well, he was."

"But not by someone of the gracious castes, as you seem to be implying." Dom Pereller's brain pounds against the front of his skull. His mouth is suddenly hot and dry.

"By me; is that what you are trying to say, Hemmenveth?" There is a deadly calm in his voice he does not feel. Dom Hemmenveth gives ground.

"Oh no, not at all, not at all Perellen, as you said, we are not men who murder for shadows. Indeed, given your provocation, you did not even employ satirists: great restraint, citizen, great restraint."

"It was a rager killed the gentle Dom," suggests Dom Perellen and his friends mutter their agreement. There being nothing more to be said they go down to their boats and Dom Gerrever calls out in parting, "Perellen, the masque at the House Kerrender this MatinsDay, remember." As the boats pull away from the mooring Dom Perellen remains awhile, head bent, breathing deeply, trying to regain his composure. He is trembling. It had been close. He forces the fear and the guilt down his

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gullet and draws himself up. It is then that he sees the solitary figure in white running across the empty, fog-shrouded plaza. For an instant the face is turned to him. Behind the funeral mask are eyes he knows.

"Serenade!" His lunge for shore sets the gondola rocking dangerously. "Serenade!" Far away at the edge of the cloister the figure turns again for a moment, then hurries on. "Serenade." Doves explode into the air from the bell-keeps of the Hall of Weeping and the massive buttresses of pale stonework return his cry to him.

He is to see her again: spied from a high balcony, singular for a moment among the anonymous faces of the street entertainers and mendicants in the Bourse. Again, as a glimpsed figure hurrying up the steps of a watergate in Harhadden. She turns for an instant at his call but there is no recognition and she does not wait. Again, on a water-taxi sweeping past his gondola on the Canal St. Nimien. Lastly, alone at a far table in a crowded cafe by the Damantine Fountain. By the time he presses his way between the chattering luncheoners she is gone, leaving only a five pego tip and musky wisp of perfume prepared from the powdered wings of night moths.

His discreet inquiries at the House Merreveth prove only that she is gone. Delving into past acquaintances from his rakish days discloses nothing. Her friends know less than he. She has vanished back into the city which raised and nurtured her. Looking out from the music-room window Dom Perellen knows that he can never find the one soul in the city's thronging millions who does not wish to be found, for what man could explore every lane and waterway of a city that changes and grows every day so that it may never cease growing and so stagnate and die? There is an infinity of canals and channels which reach back into derelict quarters abandoned so long ago by the slow migration to Elder Sea that their names are forgotten and their waterways choked and stagnant, where the funeral grounds of past millennia have become plazas and conventicles, chapteries and arcades, and are now returning to the ancestors who peopled them. The City of Man is upheld by the hands of the dead.

And she is there somewhere. She will come to him. She must. Otherwise Dom Merreveth's death is a hollow victory. She will come in time, and time is as plentiful as water in the sea.

After that time at the Damantine Fountain he does not see her again, not even at the ball in the House Kerrender with every Dom and Infanta in the city in attendance. Though he dances a hundred waltzes and gazes into the eyes behind a hundred masks he does not find the eyes that glow in his memories or the body that quickens the beat of his soul. There are

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smiling invitations from infanta and dom alike but he does not accept for he had hoped with a sure and certain hope that she would have been drawn here tonight like a moth to the candle. He has not yet found her, but there are still faces to be searched for heart-known eyes.

So he dances too much and drinks too much and flirts too little and by the time his friends ask him to take them home he is obnoxiously drunk and bad-tempered. He is so unpleasant that his friends (considerably more drunk than he, but good-humored) drop him on the Florinthian Steps and sail off in his gondola in search of new diversions. The sounds of laughter and merry music recede into the fog. Dom Perellen breathes in the wet air, suddenly alone and vulnerable. It is so late it is early and there is no traffic abroad on the canals. He must walk. St. Devereux's Preview will take him to Rerren Square and thence over the Bridge-of-the-Virtues to Samtanavya Prospect. From there it is no distance through the Lido to the House Perellen. But this is a gloomy area of derelict warehousing and Dom Perellen recalls with a shock the friendly face of a fat Guard saying, "Ragers, Grace, carniphages. Traced a chapter of 'em to this 'ere building." The same building which now looms over him. That puts an urgency in his step and a face in every shadow. Footfalls echo deceptively in the cold fog and the gas lanterns hiss like a slow exhalation. Scared sober, Dom Perellen stops, turns. The echo of his footsteps persists too long. They have a wrong sound, like the echo of high-heeled shoes, or claws, tapping on the cobblestones.

"Serenade?"

The scream shatters his soul like glass. He whirls to find himself face to face with snapping fangs and bulbous red eyes. The hot sweet stench of its breath drives him back, retching. The Rager twists its deformed body and hisses in its throat. Dom Perellen's mouth is open but the words take time to come. His heart surges against his rib-cage.

"The rage," Dom Perellen whispers. The rage, the alien plague from beyond the edge of the world, brought, say some, by the vessels of the transtellar merchants which splash down in the Lagoon; sown by the agents of jealous foreign governments, say others; and yet others maintain that it is the spores from an alien colonization vessel which crashed in Elder Sea thousands of years before. For the first time he is able to see the creature whole. By its shriveled breasts and wide pelvis it must once have been a woman of the City of Man. The rage has deformed her skeleton until she stands little taller than a child and tied her muscles into powerful tight knots beneath her fur. In the swollen bulbs of her eyes, adapted by the disease for better night vision, there dwells a certain unclean madness. Dom Perellen edges away from the creature, hands outspread in a human gesture of placation, but the rager is beyond the reach of all things human for the plague has harrowed and violated her

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humanity and warped her body into an obscene travesty. She howls, the flames behind her eyes will not let her rest until she has tasted human flesh. She bares her teeth in the lantern-light and smashes Dom Perellen to the cobbles with a sweep of her arm. Then she is on him. Claws rip at his head, tearing away his flimsy party mask. Teeth the length of fingers snap in his face. The sweet stench of plague gusts hot in his nostrils. The jaws lock like cocked gintraps for the killing bite through the throat. In his last moment Dom Perellen is aware of two things:

A searing blue flash.

A stench of burning meat.

The carniphage spasms and rolls from him to lie smoking gently on the cobblestones, teeth bared to the moon. The mask is clenched in her fingers. A charred hole has been stabbed cleanly between her breasts. Across the square the St. Charl Guard holsters his light-lance and runs to assist.

"Is the Grace all right? No wounds, no bites or scratches?" For this is the manner in which the rage claims its victims, through spores transmitted in the saliva of the carniphage which infect the slightest wound. Dom Perellen shakes his head and mumbles "All right, all right." Then the trembling starts, a spastic twitching so debilitating that the Guard has to help him to the launch. He is taken back to the House Perellen where his servitors fuss and fluster with warm quilts and healing broths and sleeping draughts. The Dom orders them out of his sight and shuts himself in the music room. Under the benign gaze of his ancestors he works the spasms from his fingers on the manuals of the Instrument. He commences with small whispering sounds, like the wind and the water and the scampering of mice. At the beginning of fifth hour he adds new tones, intricate repetitive sequences of pipes and bells. Then he brings in distant thunderous bass chords: storms and tempests in the mountains of the land beneath the sea from which his people came. Convoluted treble melodies occupy him for an hour or so, then he explores matching harmonies and subtle rhythms. He constructs his music hour on hour, layer upon layer like the strata of ancient sedimentary sandstones until the windows burst open under the pressure of music and the notes pour forth into the city in a waterfall of voices, singing down the empty canals and swirling around the eaves of the ancient houses in search of hidden things.

At last Dom Perellen lifts his hands from the manuals and the vast music dies away until only the tiny whispers and sussurations remain. In the silence after there is the sound of two hands clapping.

Dom Perellen turns and she is there, smiling and applauding.

She makes to leave and Dom Perellen is beside her.

"Why have you come? Why are you here?" She will not reply, but leads

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him on a thread of perfume made from the crushed wings of night moths out of the music room and along the passage to his bed chamber. And there, under the plaster cherubs and peacocks and virgins, she gives herself to him and stops his questions with her mouth. By the light of cobwebbed candelabra their love builds like a symphony, like the stratified music by which Dom Perellen called her out from the hidden places of the city. Dom Perellen's hands grip great fistfuls of dark hair, he has never known such joy as she gives him her breasts and her mouth and the hidden places of her body on the divan that is as wide as all the sea. Together they scale the pinnacles of pleasure in a love that threatens to consume them both and leave nothing but ashes. Yet there is something amiss in her lovemaking, something passionless and mechanical, as if they were two animals caught in the frenzy of rut. She does not utter a word, not a sigh nor a moan.

At the height of their passion she drives her teeth into his shoulder with such force that she draws blood but Dom Perellen scarcely feels it, swept away on the tide of his own pleasure. It is only afterwards, in the sadness that always follows, that he notices the smell, the smell of something sweet, something rotting, something ancient, and foul. It is familiar but for the moment he cannot place it. Then it is forgotten as Serenade bends to his lips again. He looks into her gentle eyes and there sees a thing which freezes the pith of his being. Around each iris, in tiny stenciled letters, are the words, *Brothers Ho: Taxidermists.*

Then he knows what his replicate brothers have done to him. He knows why Serenade has come here, and the nature of her business among the abandoned warehouses of Sessereth. He sees her opening her lips to the carniphage's poisoned kiss and recognises the stench of the rage. He feels the inhuman machinery beneath her skin, and the warm welling of blood from his shoulder. He makes a despairing lunge for the bell-pull but it was too late from the morning he saw her before the cloisters of the Hall of Weeping. Then the fire blossoms in his brain and red pain sweeps away his reason as the rage takes possession. He is given time for one final look at Serenade, the last memory he will take into insanity, then his humanity blows out like a candle and the animal is set free.

Last of all we see a boat waiting in the dawn light by the steps beneath the Bridge-of-the-Virtues. In it stand three men in white wearing identical funeral masks. In the bow sits a strikingly beautiful woman, but there is a touch of strange about her perfect stillness, something too precise, almost mechanical. The three men have their hands crossed on their breasts and the air of focused attention of those listening for a distant sound, perhaps the cry of some naked twisted creature of the night turning away from the burning light of day. A corpse-boat glides

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by, silent and serene as a swan, journeying out to Elder Sea. Taking its passage for a sign of some kind, the three men turn their boat away from the Bridge-of-the-Virtues, away from the Sea, and journey inwards into the City of Man to claim their inheritance. ●

MARTIN GARDNER

(from page 39)

SOLUTION TO PLAYING SAFE ON THE BAGEL

The word is NTH.

Tanya, who enjoyed every type of word play, spent many hours studying the safe's pattern of letters. The longest word she could find that uses only white letters was SEMISUCCESSES. PHFFFT was the longest expression she could find on the gray keys.

One afternoon Tanya covered the L key with a piece of blue tape. The Captain had eliminated all red tape on the *Bagel* by the simple expedient of allowing only blue tape.

"I've invented a new kind of puzzle," she said to her father. "What man's name does this keyboard signify?"

"That's easy," said Couth. "I'm afraid you reinvented an old chestnut. The answer is NOEL—no L. It's in one of Gardner's math books. Persons used to put it on Christmas cards back in the days when there was a popular Christmas carol that began with 'Noel, noel. . . .' Don't look so disappointed. It was clever of you to think of it. Here's a similar one I remember seeing in an old British puzzle book."

Couth transferred the piece of blue tape from L to W.

Tanya studied the keyboard for several minutes. "How about a hint? What kind of word is it?"

"Let's say it describes where you can go on Earth and be absolutely safe during an all-out nuclear war."

Tanya never solved it. If you can't do better, turn to page 123.

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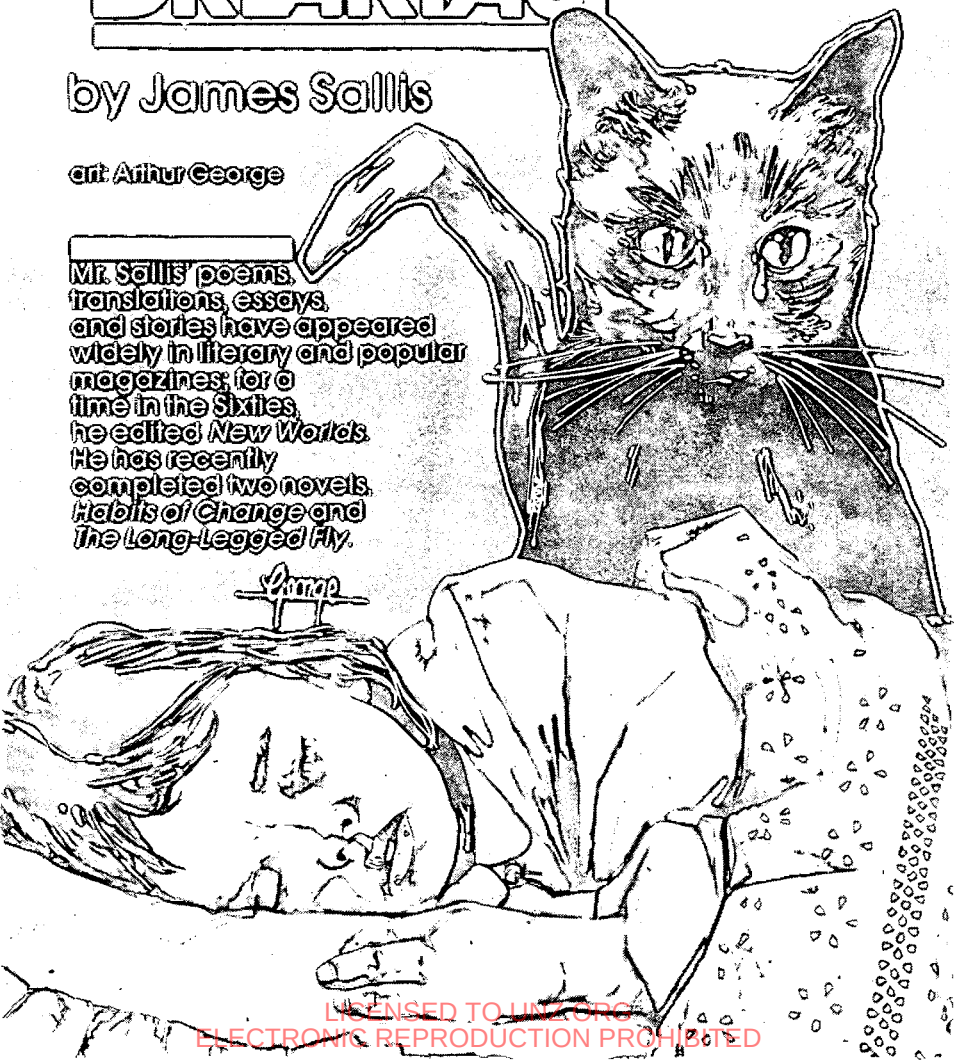
Impossible Things Before Breakfast

by James Sallis

art: Arthur George

Mr. Sallis' poems, translations, essays, and stories have appeared widely in literary and popular magazines; for a time in the Sixties, he edited *New Worlds*. He has recently completed two novels, *Habits of Change* and *The Long-Legged Fly*.



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Each morning my cat Ahab returns from nightly wanderings to tell me all he has seen. It does not go well, Ahab says. Plague and pestilence have followed close upon the heels of initial destruction. Ahab has seen groups of men and packs of dogs fighting over abandoned bodies. Near the center of what was once town these bodies are piled high within a compound of barbed wire, and are burned daily.

For some time I believed that Ahab made up these stories to amuse me, aware of how bored I grew with his daily reports; I am still not completely certain. Details change from day to day, waver as though windblown, but his descriptive powers are so profound that surely he *has* to have seen what he recounts; surely he cannot be *that* creative.

After he has gone and Motherdear brings breakfast and bath, I lie here thinking what it was like before. I am supposed to study during this time, but I cannot imagine why. What could I possibly do with knowledge? And in the world Ahab brings me, what use could study ever be—or anything else?

Actually I remember very little from before. I imagine that I can feel myself pulling against a swing's ropes and lifting my feet to see blue squares of sky approaching, receding, returning. I think I may recall sometimes the feel of sunlight and wind on bare legs, on my face, the sound of words blossoming in my mouth, Father's hands on my hips.

All this was in a different world, of course. And as with Ahab's tales, I may be conjuring it all up, spinning these stories on memory's loom with thin air in place of flax.

Flax was in my vocabulary lesson yesterday.

I am almost fourteen. Motherdear brings me books from the library about fourteen-year-olds who spend all week worrying over who'll ask them to the Saturday dance and whether Sally or Billy still likes them. After dinner Motherdear turns me onto my side and the TV to a sitcom. As soon as she is gone I use my chin to switch to evening news. Central America simmers on the back burners while, pushed to the front, the Middle East boils over. Soviets and the CIA take turns overrunning smaller, neighboring nations. There's no one alive who can understand why there has to be so much hatred and pain in the world. Perhaps there's really no one alive even to try anymore. But again, as with Ahab's stories and my memories, I've no way of knowing what, if any, of all this is true. Is the human race's hatred, greed, and fear about to bring it to wipe itself off the face of the earth like a spreading spill, and everything else with it? Maybe that is what should, must, happen. But all this, this news, could be, like the sitcoms, just another form of entertainment, only something to distract us, something to divert attention from private, unbearable despair.

Sometimes at night, after Motherdear retires, I am able to switch the TV back on and watch the adult-entertainment channel. It's about then

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also that Ahab wakes from his daylong nappings, dark pearls on a string. He always comes to see me before leaving, peering curiously at what takes place on the screen, much as I watch the news, I think, then vaulting onto the sill by the open window (open always for fresh air) and, muscles bunching under his sleek coat, into the night.

Days ago when Ahab returned there was a cricket in the room and I'd been unable to sleep for many hours, its chirring like an electric current in the darkness. Ahab listened for a moment and went directly to where the cricket hid in a corner beneath the bureau, but somehow understood that I did not wish it harmed. Emerging from beneath the bureau he brought it to show me (black as himself, and just as alive), then dropped it onto the grass outside the window. He told me of bodies burst open like melons, of others wearing black disguises of ants and carrion birds.

Breakfast has been only oatmeal or other cereal with dried fruit added for weeks now, sometimes with watery milk, once with even a small cup of cocoa. It is all there is, Motherdear says, and it is good for you. I eat what I can of it. The skin of Motherdear's arms has turned hard and transparent; they are two yellow candles, hands flicking about at their ends like pale flames. I have noticed that she has difficulty lifting even a part of me from the bed as she straightens it and bathes me each morning now. Every day she comes to my room a little later.

Sometimes I imagine that I remember (though of course I could not possibly do so) the afternoon this world began ending. Maybe it's just another story Ahab has told me. I hear the doctor outside telling Motherdear (though she wasn't then, not yet, Motherdear) that "the most we can hope for's a quad." "A what?" she says. "A quadriplegic." Then a pause. "That's my daughter, young man," Motherdear says. "That's my ten-year-old daughter in there." Father cannot keep his eyes away from my bare breasts. I see Billy Devin, the one who dared me to jump, huddled into a corner by shelves. He must have been one of the first to die.

And that was the end of before. For a time friends came to visit, even Billy and some of the teachers, but no one comes anymore. Even Motherdear doesn't want to come.

How can people so uncaring, so taken with their own needs, with their tiny plots and lives, people inured or oblivious to others' pain and terrible loneliness, possibly expect to survive?

Ahab comes late this morning: Motherdear is already here. "Ahab?" she says. "A cat? But you *have* no cat, dear. We had to get rid of the cat, surely you remember. The doctors insisted."

Very well. But Motherdear will not be back tomorrow.

And soon there will be none other than Ahab and myself, no one but us to begin the new world. In the mornings he will bring me food and news (insects, at least, will survive, they say) and in the long nights lie beside me, his cruel, soft paw against my quickening thigh. ●

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by George Alec Effinger

UNFERNO

art: Arthur George

George Alec Effinger's latest novel, *The Nick of Time*, will soon be published by Doubleday. A companion novel, *The Bird of Time*, will follow in about a year. Mr. Effinger would like to offer a tip of the "Hatlo hat" to Dante, Milton, and Niven and Pournelle, for all the material he copped from them for "Unferno." He says there is an old Ghidanese proverb that goes, "You can be only as rich as the houses you burgle."

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Morton Rosenthal was a small, mousy man who, in another story, had murdered his wife and ground her into hamburger. We'd better get a good look at him here while he's still vaguely connected to his earthly form; he'd just died, you see, and he was standing before a battered wooden desk, understandably dazed and bewildered. If they were still producing new episodes of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," Morton Rosenthal would be played by John Fiedler. If you know who John Fiedler is, you have an immediate and rather complete image of Morton Rosenthal; if you don't know, John Fiedler played one of Dr. Hartley's patients on "The Bob Newhart Show," the henpecked Mr. Peterson. But they're not making "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" anymore, or that "Bob Newhart Show," either; and Morton Rosenthal himself was dead, too. He hadn't adjusted to it yet—he had never been a brilliant person. For thirty-five years he'd been a butcher, a competent, honest, and hardworking butcher; but he'd been pretty much of a washout as a human being. He would have made a terrific porcupine, and he had the stuff to have been a truly first-rate weasel. But you get the idea.

"You got that?" asked the angel with the deep voice.

Rosenthal just blinked. The angel drummed his fingers on the desk, looking virtuous but as nearly impatient as an angel can look. "No," said Rosenthal at last.

"Fill out the card. We got a whole crowd of people waiting behind you."

"Sorry," muttered Rosenthal. He really hated causing any inconvenience.

" 'S all right," said the angel. "Number thirty-four?" A fat black woman raised her hand timidly and walked slowly and painfully to the desk. Rosenthal looked at the card he held in one hand, the pencil he held in the other. He didn't remember receiving either. He didn't even remember coming here. He didn't remember—

—dying. His eyes opened wide. He was dead, really *dead*. "Oh, my God," he said to himself. He knew what being dead meant; it meant that everyone who had ever lived would know every little humiliating thing about him. They were all waiting for him here, especially Rose, his USDA

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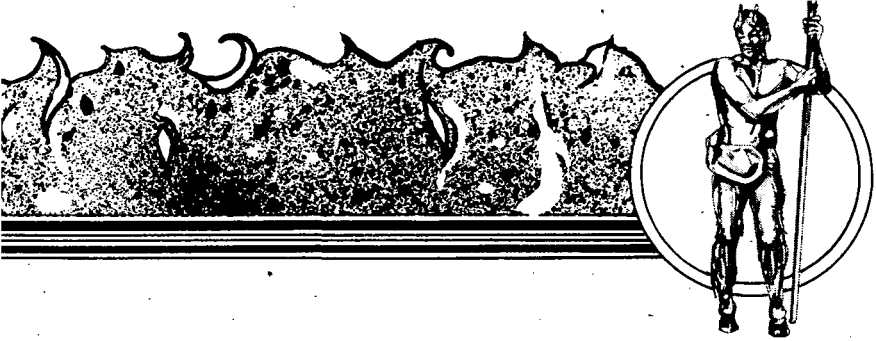

prime-cut wife. He was in for it now. His mouth got very dry and his ears started to ring. He had never felt so guilty in his life, and he knew that this was absolutely the worst place he could be to be guilty. They had their coldly methodical ways of adding up your score, he figured; and he sensed, too, that it was just about half an hour too late to try to get by on charm. He didn't yet have any idea how closely this Afterlife matched the various versions he'd heard about or imagined on Earth, but it didn't make much difference: there weren't many of them that welcomed uxoricides with open arms.

The card. Rosenthal looked down at the card. The first question on it was: *How long has it been since your last confession?*

Talk about shocked! Rosenthal just stared at it uncomprehendingly. Slowly, like sewage backing up in the pipes of his old Brooklyn apartment, meaning attached itself to the separate letters, then to entire words, and at last to the question as a whole. They wanted to know how long it had been since he'd "been to confession." Rosenthal knew he was really getting off on the wrong foot here, and there didn't seem to be any way to make himself more acceptable. He went up to the desk and waited until the angel finished giving the same set of instructions to a freckled little boy. The angel glanced up. "You're not number forty-six, are you?"

"No," admitted Rosenthal, "I was number thirty-three. You want to know how long it's been since my last confession, and I'm not even Catholic."

The angel sighed. "Sorry about that, mate," he said. "Give me back that card, then go over to desk R. Tell the angel your name and she'll punch you up on her terminal. Actually, you've saved yourself some time this way."

"Is that good?" asked Rosenthal.

"Probably not," said the angel.

"Look, I'm really sorry." Rosenthal was now banking heavily on the forgiveness-and-mercy angle.

The angel smiled sadly. "You people *always* try that one. Well, we'll see how sorry you can be. Go over to desk R."

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None of that sounded good to Rosenthal. He was about ready to throw up by the time he found desk R. There was a crowd there, too, and he took a number and waited. His feet and legs were getting tired. He didn't know where he was, exactly—it was like God's equivalent of the Atlanta airport, where everybody had to go before they could go where they were *supposed* to go—but they didn't have chairs for the transients, only for the employees. There was no way to tell how long he'd been waiting, either. Nobody wanted to get into a conversation; everyone just stood around and stared at the ground or at the card or form he was holding. Everyone looked guilty. Everyone *was* guilty. So when his number was called, Rosenthal went quickly to the desk, faced an angel with green eyes, and put on a pleasant expression. His stomach was knotted tighter than when the IRS had called him in for audits. Rosenthal suspected that everyone here was in the same boat with him, so if he looked even a little more co-operative by comparison, it couldn't hurt. He forced himself to smile. "Hello," he said, "they sent me over here because I'm not a Catholic and—"

"Name?" asked the angel.

"Rosenthal, Morton M."

"M or N?" she asked.

"M," said Rosenthal. "As in 'Mary.' " He tried to smile winningly again.

"Your middle name is Mary?" she said dubiously.

"No," said Rosenthal, feeling like he was trapped in a Kafka story, "my middle initial is M as in 'Mary.' My middle name is Mendel."

"Social Security Number?"

It took some thought to remember it in this context, but he told her. "Just a moment," said the angel, entering the data.

"The other angel said this would be quicker, but he didn't explain what that meant. I mean, do you *have* to be Catholic to get into Heaven? That sounds a little, forgive me, unfair, if you know what I mean. I always thought if you just did your best, you know, lived a good life—"

Suddenly, as Rosenthal's luck would have it, there was a great uproar, a raising of voices in song and cheers, a tumult never heard on Earth,

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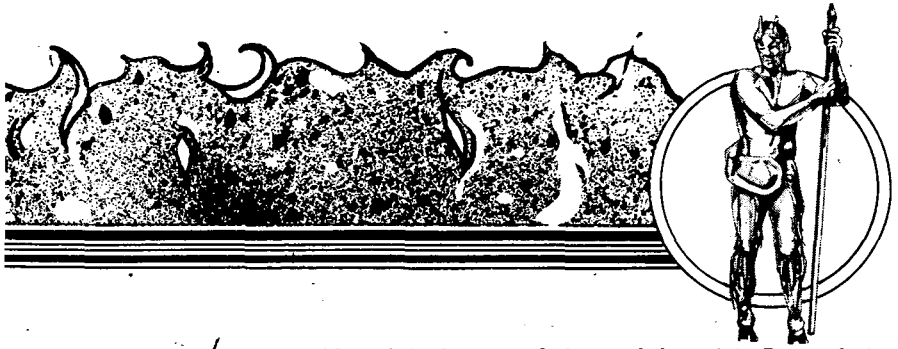

a celebration that gladdened the heart and elevated the spirit. Rosenthal turned to stare in wonder and glimpsed, far in the heavenly distance, what appeared to be troops of angels, legions of angels, great armies of angels marching, while all around yet more angels greeted them and welcomed them with an immeasurable outpouring of joy. The angel with the green eyes at desk R rose from her seat and put a hand to her throat. "My goodness," she whispered.

"What is it?" asked Rosenthal. As they drew nearer, the columns of angels seemed ragged and dirty, their wings ruffled, their pennons torn, their lances bent. What place were they returning from, and what great battle had they fought? "What is it?" asked Rosenthal again.

"I'm not sure," said the angel. She looked at him briefly, then back at the astonishing sight, then at her computer terminal. "I really want to join the jubilation, but my duty is to deal with you first."

"I'm really sorry about that," said Rosenthal. "I hope it won't—"

"Hey, mister," said the angel in an outraged voice, "you don't *have* to be Catholic to get into Heaven. You were just given the wrong card; but this says you murdered your wife! So what are you giving me a song-and-dance for?" She raised one angelic hand, slowly closing all the fingers but the index, and jabbed down at a button on her desk. "You go straight to Hell, buster," she said, evidently glad to get rid of him.

Everything went black, and Rosenthal felt as if he were moving in every direction at once. There was a kind of loud, thunderish noise, like at the beginning of *Finnegans Wake*. He realized that now he'd probably never find out what was going on in Heaven just before he left; it hadn't yet occurred to him that very soon he'd have more immediate problems to occupy his attention.

Well, not *very* soon. Travel-time Heaven to Hell, including recovery period, is nine days and nights (according to legend); that's how long it takes for the first coherent thoughts to begin to work their way into the mind, thoughts of lost bliss and eternal pain. After Rosenthal had lain nine days and nights confounded, he began to get his senses back; it was like supernatural jet lag. Hell was hot; but, of course, that came as no

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surprise. He'd expected fire and brimstone, though he had no clear idea what brimstone was. He thought brimstone was a tool of some kind, maybe used in the hat business to flatten out brims. He thought brimstone was a kind of inconvenience, as in "she weighted him down like a brimstone around the neck." As it turned out, he was wrong. Brimstone is an old word for sulfur and, when combined with fire, is very unpleasant to have to lie around in. Rosenthal climbed out of the fire and brimstone as soon as he could, and sat down on a hot rock to think and clear his head.

His first realization was that he was now naked. He hadn't felt naked in Heaven; he'd simply been unaware. Now he *was* aware, and he didn't like being naked. It made him feel very vulnerable. Hell does that to you: it breaks down your confidence, it makes you feel vulnerable. And there certainly are a great number of things to be vulnerable to in Hell, as well. It's a very carefully planned place, like a gigantic anti-amusement park. Rosenthal sat on the rock, feeling it scorching his skin, and looked out across the burning lake of sulfur. Noxious clouds of gas wafted through the gloom; the heat was intolerable; and however Rosenthal shifted position, he found no relief from the torment. He shrugged. That was the idea, he supposed, but he didn't have to like it. He stood up again on one foot until he couldn't bear it any longer, then hopped to the other foot, then sat down, then stood up again—this was going to be a hell of a way to spend eternity. At least there were no devils with pitchforks poking at him—

—no devils at all in sight. There *should* have been, Rosenthal thought. Devils would have made a nice symmetry with the angels he'd seen in Heaven. As a matter of fact, search as he might, Rosenthal neither saw nor heard another being of any sort, anywhere. No damned souls, no gleeful demons—he appeared to be all alone. Maybe that was his punishment, maybe he was supposed to wander around this immense and awful place alone forever. He shrugged again; he thought he could handle that, if that was the worst of it. He decided to take the measure of his prison, because that was the appropriate thing to do at this point in an

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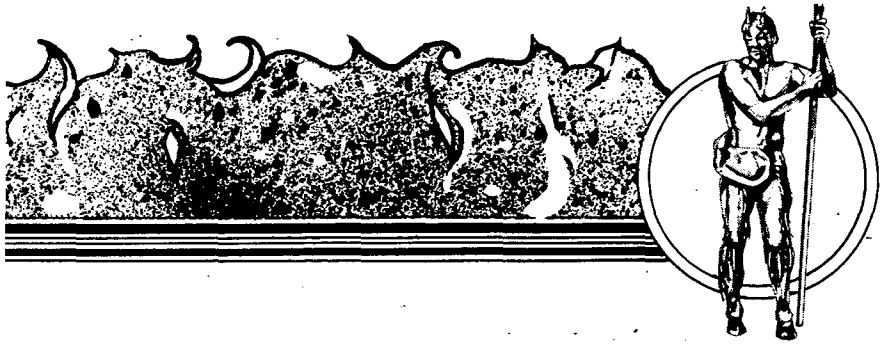

adventure. You pace your cell, you catalogue whatever objects your jailer permits you to have, you seek weaknesses where you know there are none, you tap on walls and try to communicate.

Rosenthal skipped from one foot to the other, wanting to see what was in the direction opposite the lake of burning sulfur.

He came to a plain that seemed to burn with solid fire, as the lake had burned with liquid fire. This was the very same plain to which Satan swam, where he and Beelzebub first realized their miserable fate, according to Milton. Of course, Rosenthal didn't know anything about that; he'd never heard of *Paradise Lost,* and the only Milton he knew was his dead wife's brother, supposedly a bigshot in the *schmatte* trade who always had a million reasons why his mother should stay with Rosenthal and his wife because this *macher-schmacher* Milton had all his money tied up in his spring collection or he was too busy wheeling and dealing to worry about the old lady or something. Rosenthal made a wry face; Milton would learn a thing or two when he died. There was something in there about honoring your father and mother, Rosenthal recalled. He wished he could be there when some angel asked Milton about *his* last confession.

Rosenthal, just as others before him, began slowly to comprehend the immensity of his punishment. It was hot. It was gloomy—all the flames cast "no light, but rather darkness visible" (as Milton put it). It stank. It reminded Rosenthal very much of the apartment on Second Avenue he'd lived in as a child, where his own parents had stayed until they'd succumbed to old age. He had never been able to persuade them to move—uptown, to Florida, anywhere but Second Avenue. His father had once waved an arm that took in all of that small, cabbage-reeking apartment and said, "There's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Rosenthal didn't know what the hell the old man had meant. He just knew his mother and father wouldn't leave that apartment if Eddie Cantor himself came back from the dead to talk to them about it.

Rosenthal hopped from one foot to the other. "Goddamn it," he shouted in agony, "I wish my goddamn feet would stop burning!" And just like

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that, his feet stopped burning.

"Hey," said Rosenthal. He took a couple of steps around the fiery plain, testing. He was surprised, a little puzzled. The soles of his feet had cooled, or rather they had toughened so that it no longer tortured him quite so much to stand in one place. He looked down at himself and was not pleased by what he saw: his skin had become tough and leathery and the color of old, scuffed shoes. He was as ugly as—pardon the expression—homemade sin. After a moment's thought, however, he shrugged. "So nu," he said, "if I have to look like the outside of a football, I'll look like the outside of a football. At least I won't die from hopping around." He learned that he could walk anywhere, sit anywhere, even lie down and rest for short periods without too much discomfort. There was always *some* pain after a while; but, naturally, this was Hell. You couldn't expect miracles.

He pushed his luck—what could he lose? "I don't like being naked, either," he said. "What if somebody should come by?" And just like that, he was wearing some kind of scratchy, rough, ill-fitting, foul-smelling robe. "Feh," he said, but at least he had clothes.

He headed across the murky plain, hoping that moving around a little would air out his robe. He chewed his lip and thought. "How about something to drink?" he said. And just like that, he had a mug filled with something that tasted exactly like his Uncle Sammy's homemade wine. Once his Uncle Sammy had tipped over ten gallons of that wine in his basement, and he never had a roach problem down there again. It was the worst stuff in the world. Rosenthal swallowed it, grimacing; hell, what could you expect, Manischewitz Concord Grape?

His eyes opened wider as he realized that life in Hell might not be so terrible, if he had some kind of unseen delivery service to take care of his wants. As a matter of fact, as he considered one thing and another, it was almost comfortable. It wasn't so bad as he had imagined; it wasn't much worse than getting stuck on the subway at rush hour, except here he didn't have all those sweaty, obnoxious people jammed in his face. He had privacy and leisure and, if it hadn't been Hell and if he hadn't still

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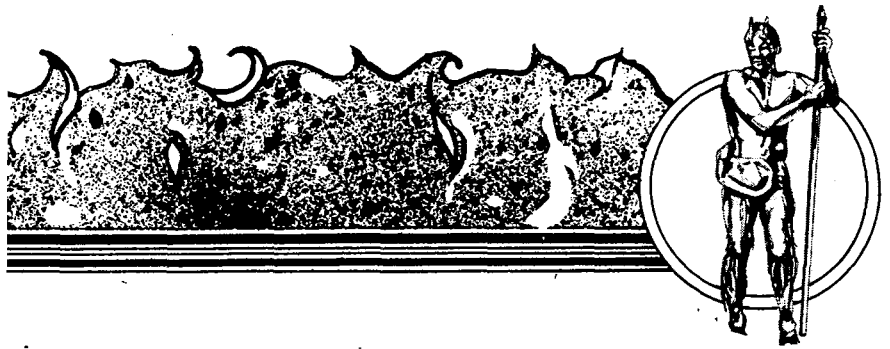

suffered every moment, he would have had peace. He heard his mother's voice saying, a million times, "You can't have everything, Morty. You can't have everything."

After he accepted the tolerable nature of his situation, he grew bewildered. After all, he had been cast out of Heaven (or, at least, Heaven's front office). He had been sent to Hell: he shouldn't be in such a good mood. Sure, the darkness and the stench and the scorching still unsettled him. Let's be truthful—if he paid any close attention to the panorama of desolation around him, he began to quake with dread and despair. Still, he shouldn't have it so good. He shouldn't have been able to wish up his tough, blackened hide and clothes and his Uncle Sammy's godawful wine. He should have been denied everything. But he wasn't about to bring that to anybody's attention.

Rosenthal shuffled across the incandescent plain until he thought he saw a wall in the distance, looming ominously through the smoky dimness. "Then there's an end to Hell," he said. That notion cheered him a little. He had no way of knowning how much time had passed as he walked; he became neither hungry nor tired, and his surroundings did not change a single detail from eon to eon. He may have walked hours or days or years—he could not say. At last, however, he came to the blackfaced cliff that bordered the plain. It rose up straight and formidable like the shaft of a great well. Rosenthal guessed that this barrier surrounded the whole of the plain with the burning lake in the center. Although the cliff slanted slightly away from the true vertical, it was still too steep and sheer for Rosenthal to climb. He stood gazing upward into the hazy heights, lost in thought, until he was startled by the sound of a voice behind him. The voice was terrified. "*Mama!*" it screamed.

Rosenthal turned and saw a young, fat, pimply girl with straggly, brown hair and broad, coarse features. She was the kind of unhappy girl Rosenthal always used to see in the company of a tall, lithe blond beauty who knew better how to fit into a sweater. Here was the drab companion sundered from her attractive friend, helpless now and alone. She was bent over, trying vainly to hide her flabby nakedness. It was an impos-

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sible task; it would have been an impossible task with the aid of an army-surplus canvas tent, and all she had to cover herself with were her hands and forearms. Perhaps out of pity, perhaps out of something less generous, Rosenthal turned his back on her.

"I'm freezing!" she cried.

Rosenthal didn't turn around. "Freezing? This is Hell, stupid. It's hot as hell around here."

"I'm *freezing!* I've *been* freezing ever since I fell into that lake of ice."

Lake of ice. Rosenthal had to think about that, now: *what* lake of ice? A lake like that didn't have a snowball's chance of lasting a minute in this place. "You're cold?" he asked. He still hadn't turned around; remembering what that girl looked like, he was prepared to spend the rest of eternity like that.

"Of *course* I'm cold! Aren't *you?"*

"I haven't been this hot since I was in Phoenix in 1950," said Rosenthal. "And at least in Phoenix a person can sit down inside a little without having to worry about getting heat stroke."

"I don't understand," said the girl, frightened. "I'm so cold and you're complaining of the heat."

"I came out of a lake of fire and you came out of a lake of ice," said Rosenthal, shrugging. "This is Hell. If you wanted things easy to understand, you shouldn't have died."

"Listen—" she began.

Rosenthal got tired of carrying on a conversation with his face to the rocky wall. He turned around and the girl dropped to her dimpled knees. "Jesus!" she cried, startled by his appearance.

"You'll forgive me," said Rosenthal, "you've got the wrong boy."

"You . . . you . . ." She couldn't get her mouth to form more words.

"*What*, girl? You're wasting my time."

She tried covering herself again, doing no better on the second attempt. She looked like she was on the verge of fainting. "*You* must be the devil! You're all . . . all leathery and awful and . . ." Her voice trailed away and she *did* faint.

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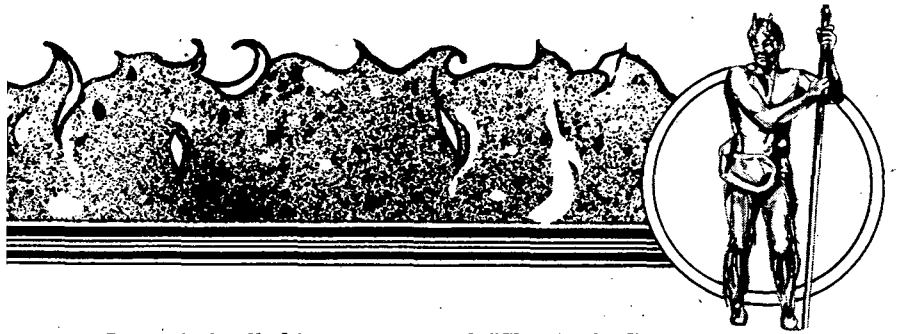

Rosenthal rolled his eyes upward. "She thinks I'm the devil," he muttered. He watched her plop on the ground and lie there for a little while; then she started to wake up.

Her eyelids fluttered, and then she opened them. "Oh, my *God,*" she whispered.

"Wrong again."

"Satan."

Rosenthal had a flash of inspiration. If she thought he was the devil, what the hell? "So what's wrong?" he asked solicitously.

She gave him a horrified look. "What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"Not a damn thing. I'm busy."

"I fell for nine days and landed in that lake of ice, pulled myself out and walked all the way here, but you're not going to *do* anything?"

He gave her a trial leer. "Are you disappointed? You have any suggestions?"

She shuddered. "No, Your Majesty," she said weakly.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, sweetheart. Why are you here?"

"You don't know, Your Majesty?"

"And if it's all the same, you can stop with that Your Majesty business, too. No, I *don't* know. What do you think I am, all-knowing or something?"

It was her turn to be confused. "They said I broke the First Commandment."

"Uh huh. Which one is that? I forget."

"Listen," said the plump girl, "can I have something to wear? I'm still freezing."

"You're still naked," said Rosenthal, leering again. He was getting the hang of it.

"Well, yeah, that too."

"Wish for it. Just wish for some clothes."

The girl looked dubious, but did as she was told. "I wish I had something nice to wear," she said in a quavery voice.

Nothing happened. No nice outfit appeared, not even a cruddy poodle

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skirt and a blouse with a Peter Pan collar. "How about that," marveled Rosenthal.

"What's the joke?" asked the girl.

"Nothing," he said. "I want a robe for this girl here," he said in a loud voice. And just like that, she had a robe. It was every bit as disgusting as his.

"Thank you, O Satan," she said meekly. She slipped, somewhat disconsolately, into the filthy garment.

"Okay," said Rosenthal, "we still got business. You were telling me about your commandment."

The girl nodded. "It's the one about worshiping false idols. They said I was paying too much attention to this graven image. They said I was the first one to get busted on that rap in a couple of hundred years." She added that with a defiant touch of pride. "They asked me if I wanted to repent my words and deeds. I said no. They hit the button, and I ended up here."

Rosenthal shook his head. "I would have gone along with them. They never gave me a chance to repent. Bing bang, here I am."

"Yes, sir."

"So what kind of graven image were you worshiping?"

"I had this kind of shrine set up in my locker at school—I went to Ste. Nitouche's Academy in Arbier, Louisiana—pictures of Dick, you know?"

"Dick?" He said it differently; apparently he misunderstood her.

"The lead singer for Tuffy and the Tectonics. Up in Heaven they said I had crossed the fine line between music appreciation and idolatry. *I* said they could never make me deny my love. They gave me until the count of ten, but I was loyal; then it was *look out for that first step.*"

"You picked Hell over Heaven on account of somebody called Tuffy and the Tectonics? I wouldn't have done that for Martha Tilton with the Andrew Sisters thrown in."

For the first time, she looked a little doubtful about it. "Maybe it was a mistake," she said.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" asked Rosenthal.

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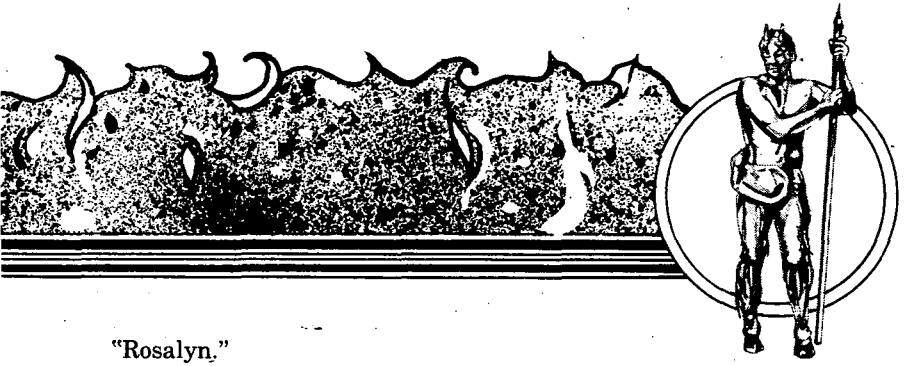

"Rosalyn."

He smiled wanly. "Nu, my wife's name was Rose," he said.

"Your wife, O Prince of Darkness?"

"Never mind. Well, you're here for some punishment, right?" She nodded fearfully. "Give me twenty pushups, right now," he said.

"Twenty pushups?" It was doubtful that she could manage even one. Getting down, with the aid of gravity, would probably be simple enough; getting back up was another matter.

"Twenty, *shiksa,* or I'll think up something even worse."

She got down in pushup position and tried her best, but she failed to do one decent pushup. "The nuns said Hell would be unimaginably terrible. I'd rather have little ugly devils with pitchforks," she said, gasping for breath.

"Very sad, very sad," said Rosenthal, clucking his tongue. "The kids of today."

"Where *are* the devils and everybody?" Rosalyn asked.

"What, you think you're special or something? You think all of Hell is going to turn out to welcome you? This is a big operation, sweetheart. I can't spare any more demons to shape you up. We have our hands full as it is."

"How do I rate your individual attention?"

Rosenthal laughed. "I haven't heard of anybody breaking Number One in a long time, either," he said. He'd always been a good liar; be'd been a lousy murderer, but he'd always been a terrific liar.

"And the penalty for breaking the First Commandment is twenty pushups?"

"Hey, you and I are just getting started here. We have all the rest of forever to kill. Who knows what I'll think up next?" He looked around at the base of the cliff and kicked together a little pile of black pebbles. "Here, pull up your robe and kneel on these for a while. See how you like *that.*"

"The nuns used to make us do this," said Rosalyn. "It's not so bad."

"Try it for a couple of hundred million years, *then* we'll talk."

Rosalyn gave him a sideways glance. "Why are you being so easy on

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me?" she asked.

"I like you. Can I help it? I like you is all."

"I'm not that kind of girl. You *know* I'm not that kind of girl."

"Listen, Rosalyn, sweetheart, you're in *Hell* now, grow up. What, you think if you do something wrong, God won't like it? God isn't *watching* anymore, Rosalyn, you've paid in advance. I'm not saying I'm entertaining ideas like that, I'm just saying you're not in some fancy Catholic girls' school in Louisiana anymore."

"You're the Arch-Enemy, the Great Tempter," she said.

Rosenthal was losing patience with this thick-skulled, fat-faced *zhlub*. *"Tempter-schmempter!"* he cried. "What do I have to tempt for, you're *already* in goddamn Hell!"

"It could be worse," she offered.

"You tell me how."

She shifted uneasily on the sharp pebbles. "I could have bat-winged things with horns pouring molten lead down my throat. I could have scaly fiends flaying the flesh off my bones while spiders crawled all over me and snakes and lizards chewed at my eyeballs. Lots of things."

"You got some good ideas, *bubeleh*," said Rosenthal. He genuinely admired her imagination; of course, a lot of the credit had to go to her Catholic school upbringing. Still, he saw that she might be valuable to have around. "There's always a place in the organization for somebody with ideas."

"You mean—"

He raised a hand, admonishing her. "I'm not promising anything, you can't hold me to it. I'm just saying that sometimes there's an opening every quintillion years or so, and I like to surround myself with bright people. You could work your way out of the class of torture*es* and into the torture*rs*. It's still unpleasant; but unless you have a crazy thing for pain, you'll find I'm sure that it's better all the way around to be on the staff."

"What do I have to do?"

Rosenthal shrugged airily. "Well, you have to flatter me a lot and praise me and tell me how wonderful I am and generally carry on as if

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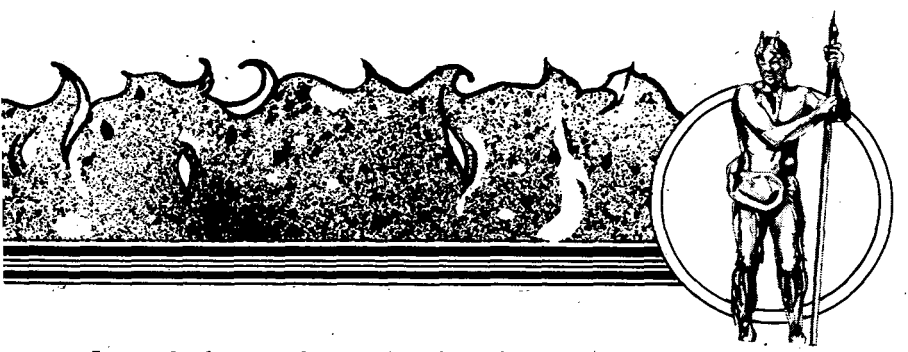

I was the hottest thing going down here. I like that kind of thing; the nuns probably told you about that. And you have to do everything I tell you."

"We're back to that again." She made a face.

"So what's so terrible? You were saving yourself for this Tuffy or something?"

"For Dick. There wasn't really any Tuffy. It was just the name of the group."

"Why don't you try some situps? I think I'm getting an idea." He watched her puff and wheeze her way through fifteen or twenty situps, he wasn't really paying close attention. She gave him a pleading look; he was feeling satanic, so he said, "Come on, come on, do a few more. I'm being generous, you know. You could end up back in the ice, frozen up to your *pupik* until, well, until Hell freezes over." He gave a good, demonic laugh and watched her pitiful eyes grow even bigger.

His idea was that he had to learn what she expected from the devil, if he hoped to pull off this impersonation. Eternity is a long time to bluff your way through any role, and Rosenthal suspected that he couldn't keep handing out mere rise-and-shine exercises. For the first time in his life—existence, rather—he felt his lack of imagination. Plaguing Rosalyn with the gruesome punishments she expected would have the additional benefit of entertaining him. The long haul was going to be pretty dull for him otherwise.

"Isn't that enough?" she whined.

"Huh? Oh, sure, knock it off for now. Listen, Rosalyn, I'll tell you what: because I'm giving you my personal supervision and because I *like* you, I'm going to do something I shouldn't do: I'm going to take it easy on you. *Wait* a minute, let me explain. I really shouldn't do this—you wouldn't believe it, but they keep an eye on me, too. They don't like that I should take it easy on somebody. After all, you're here for hard labor, not for two weeks in the Catskills. I get a little leeway, so I'm going to make you this offer. I want you to flatter me and treat me nice and tell me I'm wonderful and whatever else crosses your mind. In return, I'll

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just inflict the kind of tortures you expected with no awful *shticklech* that you'd be afraid to tell your mother about."

"Just the regular tortures? Like in the paintings?"

Rosenthal didn't have any idea what she had in mind, but he'd find out. "Like in the paintings," he said.

"You promise?"

"If you'll take my word for it."

"You're the devil. You want me to worship you," she said with some distaste.

"Oy, is that so bad? You were ready to worship this hoo-ha of a juvenile delinquent—"

"Don't you talk about my Dick that way!" She was furious. "*He* could sing. *He* could play the guitar *and* the tambourine."

"*He's* not here—yet. In the meantime, you could do worse than worship me, lots worse. Believe me."

She started to say something, then decided against it. "I'll give it a try," she said.

"Good girl. I don't expect anything fancy, no slaughtered oxen or anything. Sincerity counts with me."

"Okay, I'll wait then, until I really feel it."

"You do that. In the meantime, I wish I had some molten lead." And just like that, he had molten lead. He also had an awful inspiration for what to do with it. He laughed satanically the whole time he did it; he was growing into the part.

Just before all the molten lead was used up, a thin baritone voice called out to him. The man didn't sound so fearful as Rosalyn had. "Try tilting her upper body back a little more," the man said.

"So fine, that's just what I need now, a *kibitzer,*" said Rosenthal. "You're not here to help. Your puny *aroysgevorfineh* soul's here to get its own share of the hote lead, smartie. Take a number, I'll be right with you."

"Grüss Gott! A Jew!"

Rosenthal gave the man a long, chilly, intimidating stare. "Watch it, *bubie,* remember who you're dealing with. I can appear a million different

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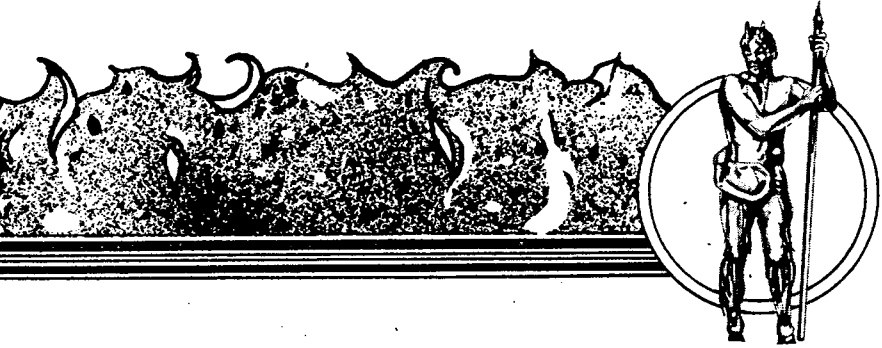

ways and I can speak a million different languages. So what are you, some kind of Nazi?"

"Yes," said the man. He was tall and skinny and young, with a sloppily trimmed beard; he looked more like the devil than Rosenthal did. He seemed perfectly unconcerned about being naked.

"Ai-yi-*yi*." Rosenthal wondered if *he* was torturing these people, or if they'd been sent to torture *him*. "And stop *grüssing Gott* around here, you're too late for that. And it gives me a pain, too."

"Sorry," said the man.

"Name?"

"Friedman, Lamar S."

"Friedman? Aha."

"My family's Lutheran."

"Of course it is. Offense?"

"Generally good, but I could have used more depth up the middle."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Sorry," Friedman said, "I did some high school football coaching. Want to know why I'm here? I committed an unforgivable sin."

"Mmneh," said Rosenthal noncommittally. "Why? Your team choke in the big game?"

Friedman laughed dryly. "Hardly. I was jilted by my fiancée."

Rosenthal thought about the twenty-nine years of wedded horror he had escaped from.

"You're a fool, Friedman," he said.

"You're saying she wasn't worth it. You never even *met* her. She was some dish."

"Dishes get filthy, they crack, they break, or else they sit in the cupboard and cockroaches crawl all over them. They're not worth having your *kishkas* pumped full of boiling lead."

Friedman blanched. "Maybe you're right," he said, staring at Rosalyn, who was loudly, raucously, and unashamedly writhing, blaspheming, imploring, and hemorrhaging. It was already getting tedious, Rosenthal thought.

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"You were telling me about your sin," said Rosenthal. "To be honest, you never got close to telling me about your sin, but let's pretend that you did."

Friedman couldn't take his eyes off the hideous sight of young Rosalyn in agony. "I broke the Second Commandment," he said, all his cockiness now gone. "That's what they told me in Heaven."

"The Second Commandment," said Rosenthal. "Which one's that?"

Friedman glanced at him briefly, but quickly looked back at Rosalyn. Her shrieks filled the silence of the empty hell. Friedman acted as if he hadn't heard Rosenthal's question.

"So which one is Number Two?" asked Rosenthal again.

Friedman looked very queasy. "That's the one about blasphemy and cursing. I took the name of the Lord in vain."

"That's what they sent you to Hell for? Did they give you a chance to repent?"

"Well, yeah."

"So what happened?"

Friedman's eyes squeezed shut. "I thought they were making a big deal over nothing. I didn't think they'd nail me for something like that. And I guess I was trying to act tough."

"You didn't repent?"

"I told them I didn't have anything to repent for; I never killed nobody, I never stole anything."

Rosenthal shook his head in disbelief. "You let them trip you on Number Two. They *are* worse than the IRS."

"At least the IRS will take a check, you can halfway dicker with them. Now I'm in Hell." He looked again at Rosalyn; made the connection that the same thing or something similar would soon be happening to him, too; and passed out.

"Some Nazi," muttered Rosenthal, looking down at Friedman. "I wish Rosalyn would stop suffering. I wish she'd be healed, too, and completely forget the whole molten-lead incident." And just like that, she was standing beside him in the same bewildered but untortured shape in which she'd arrived.

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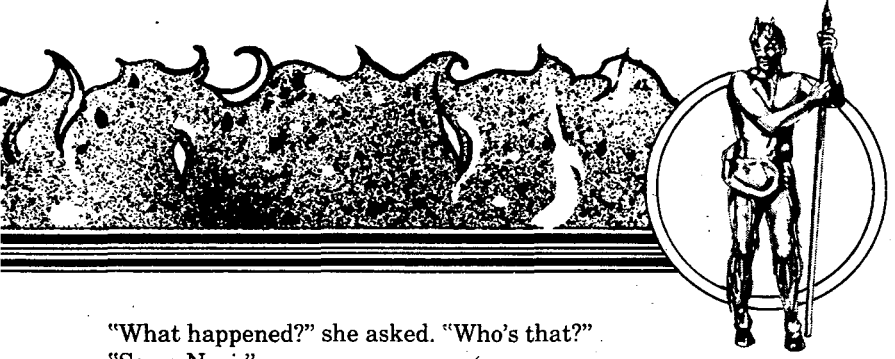

"What happened?" she asked. "Who's that?"

"Some Nazi."

"What are we going to do with him?"

"We?" asked Rosenthal. *"We?"*

Rosalyn scratched her oily scalp for a few seconds. "Weren't you offering me some kind of partnership or something?"

"Bubkes!" said Rosenthal. "Nobody's partners with me. I take on help now and then, but I *own* this place. I don't need *partners,* I need *servants.* Period."

"Whatever. What do you want me to do?"

Rosenthal smiled. "I want you should work on the new arrivals."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Sure you can. You've got *great* ideas. You've got all those plaid-skirted Ste. Nitouche's Academy horror stories you can use; and when you use all those up, you can make up brand-new ones of your very own. You can have complete freedom to express yourself. You can develop your creativity. Who knows? You may find a God-given gift you never even knew you had."

"I didn't expect such a nice reception in Hell," she said. She was still dubious.

Rosenthal was glad she didn't remember anything at all about her own recent anguish. "I want you to start on Mr. Friedman here."

"How will I do it?"

Rosenthal klopped his forehead with the heel of one hand. "I'm a fool," he said. "I wish Rosalyn had enough power to wish up torments for Mr. Friedman and whoever else comes along, but not enough power to hinder or harm me in any way." And just like that, Rosalyn became second-in-command in Hell. She woke Friedman up and took him off across the plain. Rosenthal was once again alone.

Some time later, as Rosenthal was wandering along the base of the obsidian cliff looking for an end to his boredom, he saw a growing spark of light high up above his head. It looked like a bright star, but it quickly became a burning moon, then a blazing sun. The light was too intense for Rosenthal to watch directly. He muttered a curse and averted his

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eyes, wondering what was happening now. Even in Hell you couldn't get any peace and quiet. It was always something.

The light, whatever its source, flared brighter and spread further and further through the gloom. Something was approaching Rosenthal that was going to be awfully impressive when it got there. "I wish I could look at it without feeling like I got jabbed in the eye." And just like that, he had a pair of polarized sunglasses in his hand. He put them on.

He saw a gigantic callused hand. The hand, at least as big as Shea Stadium, was ill-formed and badly manicured. It was attached to an arm so huge that it rose up into the shadows out of sight. Rosenthal shuddered, imagining how vast the entire body must be, judging by the size of this grotesque hand. He didn't want to know whose hand it was. It was reaching down into the very pit of Hell like you'd reach down into the garbage disposal to retrieve a spoon; and in the hand was the brilliant passenger.

It was an angel—an angel with a flaming sword, yet. "Ai-yi-yi," muttered Rosenthal. He felt an intense fear, although he was sure that there was nothing more Heaven could do to him. He was already in Hell, what could be worse? He had the paralyzing suspicion that very soon he was going to find out, God forbid.

The hand set the angel down on the floor of Hell and lifted itself back up into the gloom overhead. The angel looked up and waved. "Thanks, Antaeus," he called, "I'll let you know when I'm finished here."

Rosenthal just stood where he was. The sight of an angel in full glory, evidently on official business, was awesome. It made the clerk-angels he'd seen soon after his death seem almost drab. The angel of the flaming sword sighted Rosenthal and raised a hand. "Peace be with you," called the angel.

"So nu? That's why you brought a flaming sword?"

The angel smiled. "Never mind that, it just goes with the job. Personally, I think a badge or a nice cap would be better than shlepping this thing around, but it does make some impression."

"And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

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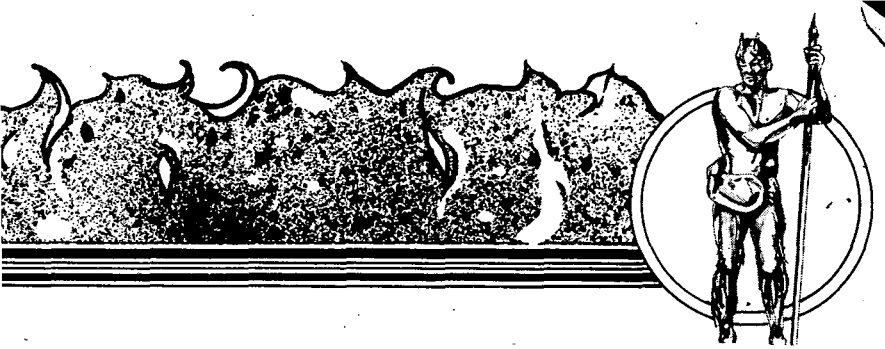

"I am Orahamiel, an angel of the order of Virtues, which is a few orders above Archangel. Virtues are the bestowers of grace, and we're also those angels men refer to as 'guardian angels.' "

"That's nice," said Rosenthal. "Well, I have work to do, so if you need anything—"

"Mr. Rosenthal," said Orahamiel sternly, "we must talk."

His own name sounded odd in Rosenthal's ears. He had long since forgotten that he had ever been Morton Rosenthal; he had assumed the role of devil, and he was brought up short by this recollection of his earthly existence. "how do *I* come to have this little chat with my *op-stairsiker?*"

"There seems to have been a minor mistake made in the handling of your case, Mr. Rosenthal. I've been sent to correct it."

Rosenthal looked down at his tough, blackened skin that even yet did not fully protect him from the incendiary fury of Hell. He gave a humorless laugh. "You people take your time," he said.

Orahamiel pretended to study his flaming sword. "Errors do not often happen in Heaven," he said. "As a matter of fact, your damnation was the very first such error in memory. We're all sorry as h— I mean, sorry as we could be about it. I know that hardly makes up for the misery you've suffered here; but I hope you'll listen to the remarkable story I have to tell, and then accept our apology."

Rosenthal was more bitter now than he'd ever been, because it had all been "a mistake." Pain and suffering were inevitable, he supposed; but nothing in the world is as hard to bear as *unnecessary* pain. "You must miss being in Heaven," he said. "You must sure be on somebody's list, to get stuck with a lousy job like this, coming down to Hell when everybody else is still up there hymning and everything."

Orahamiel looked surprised. "Why, this is Heaven," he said, "nor am I out of it. I mean, it doesn't make any difference where I am—if I have to carry a message to Hotzeplotz and back—I'm still in the presence of God."

"You're in Hell now, not Hotzeplotz."

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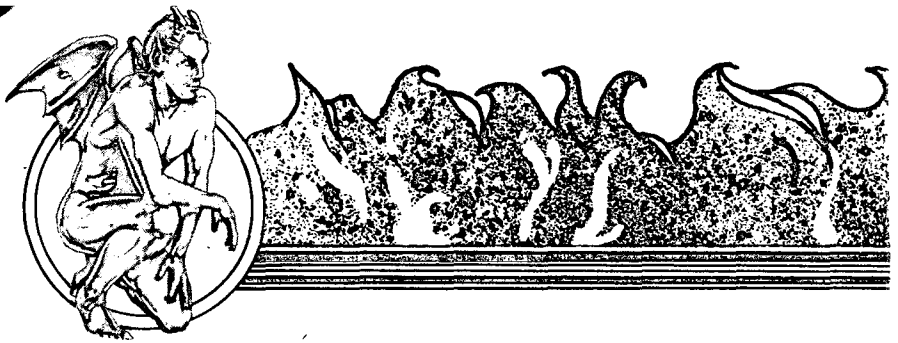

"Look," said the Virtue, spreading wide his wings, "not so much as a singed feather."

"Mmneh," admitted Rosenthal. "So you were saying?"

"Do you mind if I lean this sword against the rocks and we sit down? This is a longish story."

"Sitting hurts," said Rosenthal.

"I can relieve your pain while we sit," said Orahamiel.

"Then we'll sit."

They made themselves comfortable at the foot of the towering rocks; miraculously, Rosenthal didn't feel the slightest discomfort. It was like the sun coming out after a long, grim, and dreary day. The angel began his story. "You see, there was an interruption while your case was being processed—"

"I remember some big *tummel*. The angel who was looking at my records got up and wanted to see what was happening."

Orahamiel nodded. "Well, you'll never guess what it was all about!"

"Probably not," agreed Rosenthal.

"You just had the unbelievably *shlimm mazel* to appear in Heaven at the *precise moment* when Satan and all his fallen angels decided to repent and ask God's forgiveness. That's what all the fuss was about. They were being welcomed back into Heaven."

Rosenthal stared at the angel, then looked around the vast, frightening solitude of Hell. "That's why I was all by myself? I thought maybe being alone was my punishment, but—"

"There was always a tradition—an unofficial tradition, sometimes labeled heresy, but that was just your human theologians limiting the grace of God—in the three Middle Eastern religions that someday the devil would get fed up with Hell. All that kept him here was his pride. If he asked for mercy, God in His infinite benevolence would grant it. Satan was once a seraph, you know, and he's been given back his old rank and privileges, and nobody in all the choirs sings praises more loudly now than he."

"While Morton Rosenthal, poor shmuck of a butcher, sits on his *tuchis*

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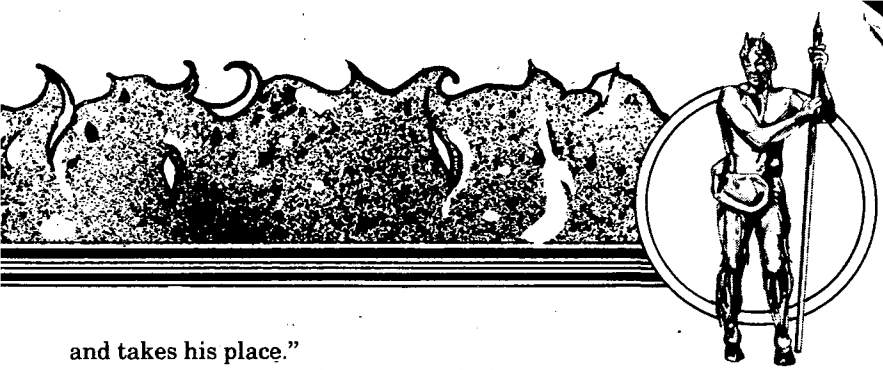

and takes his place."

"You were supposed to be asked if you repented your crimes," said Orahamiel. "Even at that last minute, if you repented, you'd have been welcomed into Heaven, too. Your angel was distracted a little by the sudden reappearance of the fallen ones. You weren't given due process."

Rosenthal shrugged. "To err is human," he said.

"But not angelic. Now, Mr. Rosenthal, I ask you: do you repent?"

Rosenthal started to respond, but closed his mouth and thought for a moment. At last he said, "Do I get a little something in the way of reparation?"

The Virtue frowned. "We're not in the reparation game, Mr. Rosenthal."

"You're telling me you don't pay for your mistakes?"

"We're making you quite a generous offer. I've come all the way to Hell to take you back to Heaven with me."

"But you won't give me anything for the physical and mental distress you've caused me. I get a better deal than that from some *momzer* who sideswipes my car. I'm sorry, but it's true."

"It isn't smart to try to bargain with Heaven, Mr. Rosenthal."

"Ha! I've got you over a barrel and you know it. You just won't admit you're wrong."

Orahamiel looked stern again. "We could see who has whom over a barrel very easily. I'll just leave you here in the darkness and wait for you to come to your senses."

"You just do that. You can't push people around like this. There's such a thing as justice, you know."

"Your choice is between Heaven and Hell. Now you must choose."

When put that baldly, the proposition made Rosenthal hesitate. "If I stay here—"

Orahamiel was astonished. "How could anyone even *consider* staying here, in preference to returning to Heaven?"

"You forget, I was never really *in* Heaven. I don't know what I'm missing."

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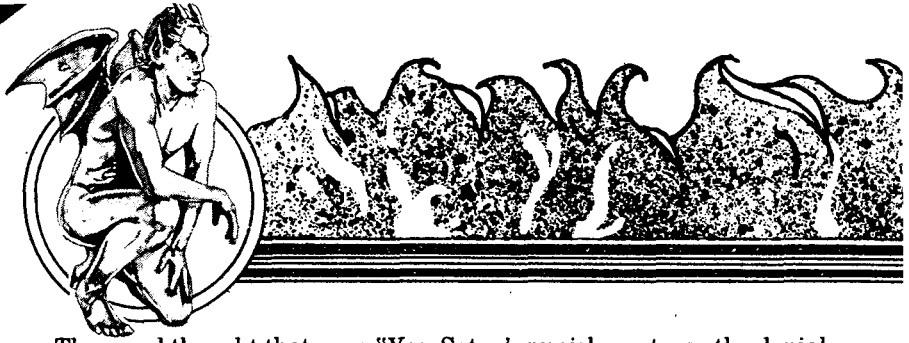

The angel thought that over. "Yes, Satan's punishment was the denial of the beatific vision, and his memory of the bliss he'd lost."

"I never had it to lose in the first place. This Hell isn't much worse than what I was used to when I was still alive."

"And I suppose you'd rather reign in Hell than serve in Heaven, that old business again?"

Rosenthal really didn't want to commit himself, but he'd come too far to back down. "I guess so," he said.

"Your answer was anticipated. Now I must learn if you plan to pursue a course of subversion against the human race, as Satan did before you."

Rosenthal's shoulders slumped. "What do you think I am?" he asked hotly, insulted.

"Well," said Orahamiel, "if this is what you wish, I'll leave you to your new kingdom, such as it is."

"You do that, see if I care," said Rosenthal. He was bluffing, although his mind was telling him to fall to his knees and beg for another chance. He thought about his wife, Rose, whom he'd murdered, waiting to greet him in Heaven. He shuddered and hardened his heart, determined that he would make the best of it in Hell, instead. Especially if he was the new *gontser macher* around here.

"That kind of reasoning is just Satan's error of pride, all over again," said the angel, reading Rosenthal's thoughts. He just shook his head, got to his feet, and gathered up his flaming sword. "Last chance," he said.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Orahamiel shrugged. "Go figure," he said sadly. He called to Antaeus. As the gigantic hand cut through the darkness lower and lower, Rosenthal looked away. Across the great plain he saw six more sinners approaching, probably Commandments Three through Eight. They'd all been given the opportunity to repent, and they'd all in their foolishness refused. He turned his back so that he wouldn't have to watch Orahamiel rising up toward Heaven. "Home is where the heart is," said the devil, disgusted by the reeking, foul place he'd chosen, disgusted by the newly-arriving lost souls, disgusted by his own stubbornness. The terrified damned inched nearer, accompanied, he now saw, by Rosalyn. "Oy," he murmured.

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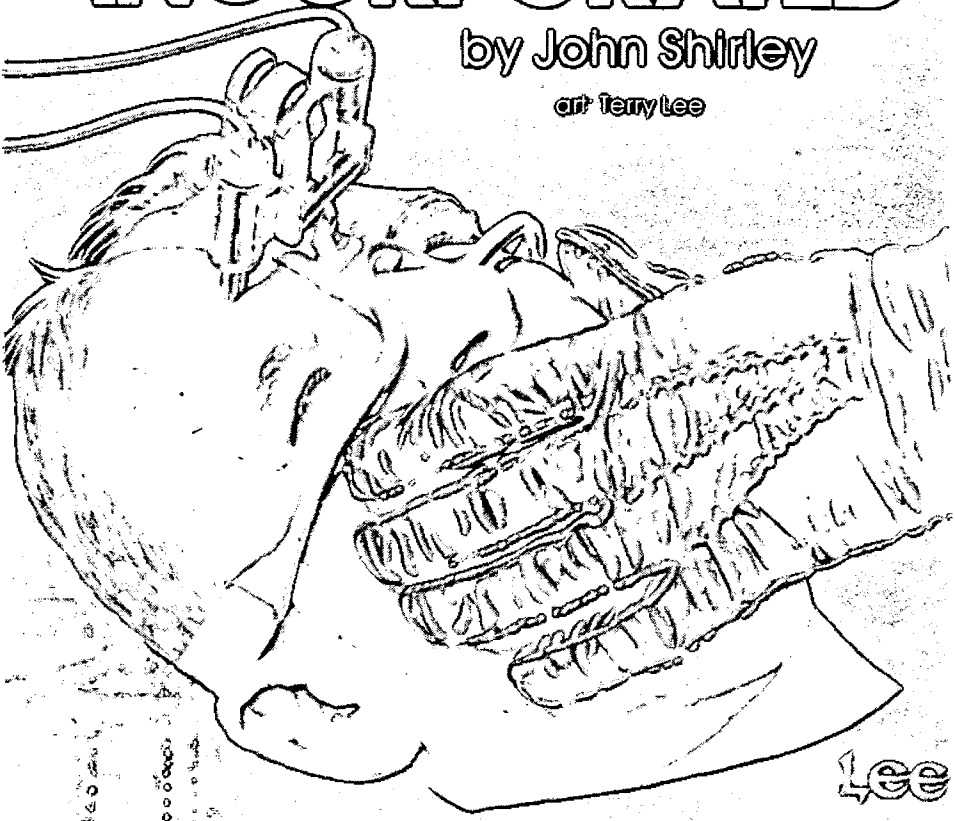
THE INCORPORATED

by John Shirley

art Terry Lee



The author has just moved to California. Recently, he's written screenplays for independent production companies, as well as a new SF novel, his first since *City Come-A Walkin'* (Dell, 1980). The novel is titled *Eclipse*, and is the first book of a future history trilogy. It will be out soon from Blue Jay Books.

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Kessler was walking east on Fourteenth Street, looking for something. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. He was walking through a twilight made raw by a mist-thin November rain sharpening the edge of a cold wind. The wind slashed at his acrylic overcoat. The street was almost deserted. He was looking for something, something; the brutally colorless word *something* hung heavily in his mind like an empty picture frame.

What he thought he wanted was to get in, out of the weather; he felt a vague resentment to the city of New York for letting the weather modification system break down again. Walking in rain made you feel naked. And acid rain, he thought, could make you naked, if you wore the kind of synthreads that reacted with the acids.

Up ahead the eternal neon butterfly of a Budweiser sign glowed sultry orange-red and blue; the same design since sometime in the 20th century. He angled across the sidewalk, pitted concrete the color of dead skin, hurrying toward the sign, toward the haven of a bar. The rain was already beginning to burn. He closed his eyes against it, afraid it would burn his corneas.

He pushed through the smudged door into the bar. The bartender glanced up, nodded, and reached under the counter for a towel; he passed the towel across to Kessler. The towel was treated with acid-absorbents; it helped immediately.

"Get any in your eyes?" the bartender asked, with no great show of concern.

"No, I don't think so." He handed the towel back. "Thanks."

The tired-faced men drinking at the bar hardly glanced at Kessler. He was unremarkable: round-faced, with short black hair streaked blue-white to denote his work in video-editing; large friendly brown eyes, soft red mouth pinched now with worry; a standard print-out greyblue suit.

The bartender said something else, but it didn't register. Kessler was staring at the glowing green lozenge of a credit transferral kiosk in the back of the dim, old-fashioned bar. He crossed to it and stepped in; the door hissed shut behind him. The small TV screen on the front of the phone lit up, and its electronic letters asked him, DO YOU WANT CALL, OR ENTRY?

What did he want? Why had he come here? He wasn't sure. But it felt right. A wave of reassurance had come over him. . . . Ask it what your balance is, a soundless voice whispered to him. A soft, maternal mental whisper. Again a wave of reassurance. But he thought: something's out of place. . . . He knew his mind as a man knows his cluttered desk; he knows when someone has moved something on his desk. Or in his mind. And someone had.

He punched Entry and it asked him his account number and entry

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code number and security code. He punched all three sets of digits in, then told it he wanted to see his bank balance. It told him to wait. Numbers appeared on the screen.

$NB 760,000.

He stared at it. He punched for error check and confirmation.

The bank's computer insisted that he had seven hundred and sixty thousand NewBux in his bank account. There should be only four thousand.

Something was missing from his memory; something had been added to his bank account.

They tampered with me, he thought, and then they paid me for it. Who?

He requested the name of the depositor. The screen told him: UNRECORDED.

Julie. Talk to Julie. There was just no one else he discussed his projects with till they were patented and on-line. No one. His wife had to know.

Julie. He could taste her name in his mouth. Her name tasted like bile.

Julie had been home only a few minutes, Kessler decided, as he closed the door behind him. Her coat was draped over the back of the couch, off-white on off-white. She liked things off-white or battleship grey or powder blue.

She was bent down to the minifridge behind the breakfast bar. She stood up, a frosted bottle of Stolichnaya in her hand. "Hi, Jimmy."

She almost never called him Jimmy.

Julie came out with a vodka straight up and a twist of lime for each of them. He'd learned to like vodka because she did. She padded across the powder-blue rug in bare feet, small feet sexy in sheer hose; she was tall and slender and long-necked. Her hair was the yellow of split pine, cut short as a small boy's, and parted on the side. She was English, and looked it; her eyes were immaculate blue crystals. She wore her silk-lined, coarse-fiber, off-white dress suit. The suit with no shoes. She looked more natural in her suits than in anything else. She had "casuals" to wear at home, but somehow she never wore them. Maybe because that would be a concession to homelife, would almost be a betrayal of the Corporation Family. Like having children. What was it she said about having children? *If you don't mind, I'll continue to resist the programming of my biological computer. When DNA talks, I don't listen. I don't like being pushed into something by a molecule.* He took off his coat, hung it up, and sat down beside her on the couch. The vodka, chilled with no ice, waited for him on the glass coffee table. He took a drink and said, "There's

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seven hundred and sixty thousand NewBux in my bank account." He looked at her. "What did they take?"

Her eyes went a little glassy. "Seven hundred and sixty thousand? Computer error."

"You know it's not." He took another sip. The Stoly was syrupy thick from being kept in the freezer. "What did you tell Worldtalk?"

"Are you accusing me of something?" She said it with her icy Vassar incredulousness then, like: I can't believe anyone could be so painfully unsophisticated.

"I'm accusing Worldtalk. You're theirs. They do as they like with you. If Worldtalk says it's not productive to have kids, if Worldtalk says it's not *teamplaying* to have kids, you don't have kids. Even when their disapproval is unnecessary: You wouldn't have had to quit your job—I can understand you wanting to have a career. We could have had the kid in a hired womb or an artificial womb. I would've taken care of it during the day. If Worldtalk says listen for Usefuls, you listen. Even at home. They don't want employees, at Worldtalk, they want to *own you.*"

"It's pointless to go over and over this. Worldtalk has nothing to do with my decision not to have children. I worked eight years—"

"I know it by rote: You worked eight years to be assistant New York manager in the country's biggest PR and advertising outfit. You tell me *having children* is demeaning yourself! Eight years you licked Grimwald's boots! Going to Worldtalk's family sessions, letting them psych you up after work for hours at a time, co-opting your instincts!"

She stood up, arms rigid at her sides. "Well, why not? Corporation families *last.*"

"It isn't a real family. They're using you. Look what they got you to do! To *me.*"

"You got some seven hundred thousand NewBux. That's more than you would ever have made on any of your harebrained schemes. If you worked for a corp you'd be making decent money in the first place. You insist on being freelance so you're left out in the cold, and you should be grateful for what they—" she snipped the sentence in two with a brisk sibilance, and turned away.

"So we've dropped the pretenses now. You're saying I should be grateful for the money Worldtalk gave me. Julie— *What did they take?*"

"I don't *know!* You didn't tell me what you were working on—and anyway I don't believe they took anything. I—god damn it."

She went to bathroom to pointedly take her Restem, making a lot of noise opening the prescription bottle so he'd hear and know it was his fault she had to take a tranquilizer.

Bascomb was drunk and drugged. The disorder of his mind was

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splashed onto the room around him: the dancers, the lights, the holograms that made it look, in the smoky dimness, as if someone was there dancing beside you who wasn't. A touristy couple on the dance floor stopped and stared at another couple: horned, half human, half reptiles, she with her tongue darting from between rouged lips; he with baroque filips of fire flicking from his scaly nostrils. The touristy couple laughed off their embarrassment when the deejay turned off the holo and the demon couple vanished.

Bascomb chuckled and sucked some of his cocaine fizz through a straw that lit up with miniature advertisements when it was used; lettering flickering luminous green up and down its length.

Sitting beside him, Kessler squirmed on his barstool and ordered another Scotch. He didn't like Bascomb like this. Bascomb was young, tanned, and preppie; he wore a Japanese Action Suit now, a kind of clinging, faintly iridescent jumpsuit. He was used to seeing Bascomb in his office, a neat component of Featherstone, Pestlestein, and Bascomb, Attorneys at Law, friendly but not too friendly, intense but controlled. My own fault, Kessler told himself: chase the guy down when he's off-work, hassle his wives till they tell me where he hangs out, find out things I don't want to know about the guy. Like the fact that he's bisexual and flirting with the waiter.

The bar was circular, rotating slowly through the club, leaving the dance floor behind now to arrive at the cruising rooms. As they talked it turned slowly past flesh-pink holographic porn squirmings and edged into the soft music lounge. Each room had its own idiosyncratic darkness, shot through with the abstracted glamor of the candy-apple red and hot pink and electric blue neon tubes running up the corners to zig-zag the ceiling like a time-lapse photo of night-time city traffic.

Bascomb turned on his stool to look at the porn and the live copulation; his mouth was open in a lax smile. Kessler looked over his shoulder. Again in the dimness the holos were nearly indistinguishable from the real article; a drunken swinger tried to fondle a woman with four breasts, only to walk through her. "Do we have to talk here?" Kessler asked, turning back to the bar.

Bascomb ignored the question. "The bottom line, Jim, is that you are a nobody. Now if you were; say, a Nobel-Prize-winning professor at Stanford, we might be able to get you your day in court, we might get a Grand Jury to investigate the people at Worldtalk . . . " Talking without taking his eyes off the intermingled porn and people. "But as it is you're a mildly successful video editor who makes a hobby of working up a lot of media theories. Every day some crank looking for attention announces a Great Idea has been stolen from his brain, and ninety-nine percent of the time they turn out to be paranoid or a liar or both. I'm not saying you're a

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paranoid or a liar. I believe you. I'm just saying I'm probably the only one who will."

"But I have the seven-hundred-sixty-thousand—"

"Did you request the name of the depositor?"

"Unrecorded."

"Then how are you going to prove a connection?"

"I don't know. But I know an idea was stolen from me. I want it back, Bascomb. And I can't work it up again on my own from scratch—I wouldn't know where to begin; it was all on a disk, and in paper files. Both are gone. They took all my notes, everything that could lead me back to it . . . "

"Sucks," Bascomb said sympathetically. They had rotated into the lounge; people on couches watched videos and conversed softly. Sometimes they were talking to holos; you knew when you were talking to a holo because they said outrageous things. They were programmed that way to ease the choking boredom of lounge bar conversation. "I want it back, Bascomb," Kessler repeated, his knuckles white on the rim of the bar.

Bascomb shrugged and said, "You haven't been in this country long; maybe you don't know how it works. First off, you have to understand that . . . " he paused to sip from his cocaine fizz; he became more animated almost instantly, chattering on: "you have to understand that you can't get it back the way it was taken. Whoever it was probably came in while you were asleep. Which adds credence to your theory that Julie was involved. She waits up or pretends to sleep, lets them in, they shoot you up with the receptivity drug. The beauty of the RD is that it works instantly and not only makes you cerebral-program receptive but keeps you sedated. They put the wires and tubes in through the sinuses, but they don't damage anything. They've got lots of microsurgicals in the big box they've brought with them, right? They look at the screen they've set up that translates your impulses into a code they can understand. They get some dream free-association maybe. But that tells them they're 'on line' in your brain. Then they put a request to the brain, fed into it in the form of neurohumoral transmitter molecules they manufacture in their box—"

"How do you know so much about this?" Kessler asked, unable to keep the edge of suspicion out of his voice.

"We get a case like yours once or twice a year. I did a lot of research on it. The ACLU has a small library on the subject. It really gets their goat. We didn't win those cases, by the way; they're tough . . . " He paused to sip his fizz, his eyes sparkling and dilated.

Kessler was annoyed by Bascomb's treating his case like a curiosity, a conversation piece. "Let's get back to what happened to me."

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"Okay, uh—so they made a request to the biological computer we call a brain, right? They asked it what it knew about whatever it was they wanted to take from you, and your brain automatically begins to think about it, and sends signals to the cortex of the temporal lobes or to the hippocampus; they 'ride' the electrochemical signals back to the place where the information is stored. They use tracer molecules that attach themselves to the chemical signals. When they reach the hippocampus or the temporal lobes, the tracer molecules act as enzymes to command the brain to simply unravel that particular chemical code. They break it down on the molecular level. They extract some things connected to it, and the chain of ideas that led to it, but they don't take so much they make you an idiot because they probably want your wife to cooperate and to stay with Worldtalk. Anyway, the brain chemistry is such that you can ask the brain a question with neurohumoral transmitter molecules, but you can't imprint on the memory, in an orderly way. You can feed in experiences, things which seem to be happening now—you can even implant them so they crop up at a given stimulus—but you can't feed in ready made *memories*. Probably because memories are holographic, involving complexes of cell groups. Like you can pull a thread to unravel a coat fairly easily but you can't ravel it back up so easily . . . Look at that exquisite creature over there. She's lovely, isn't she? Like to do some imprinting on her. I wonder if she's real. Uh, anyway . . . you can't put it back *in*. They take out, selectively, any memory of anything that might make you suspect they tampered with you, but lots of people begin to suspect anyway, because when they free associate over familiar pathways of the brain and then come to a gap—well, it's jarring. But they can't prove anything."

"Okay, so maybe it can't be put back by direct feed-in to the memory. But it could be relearned through ordinary induction. Reading."

"Yeah. I guess it would be better than nothing. But you still have to find out who took it. Or if you work out what it was, you want to prove they stole it. Even if it turns up as someone else's project—proves nothing. They could have come up with it same way you did. And you should ask yourself this: Why did they take it? Was it simply for profit or was it for another reason? From what we've been able to find out, about a third of the ideas that are stolen out of someone's brain are stolen for reasons of protection. The bigger corporations have a network of agents. Their sole job is to search out people with developing ideas that could be dangerous to the status quo. They try to extract the ideas before they are copyrighted or patented or published in papers or discussed in public. They take the idea from you, maybe plant some mental inhibitors to keep you from working your way back to it again. If you came up with an idea that was *really* dangerous to the Status Quo, Jimmy, they might go farther than

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a simple erasing next time. Because they play hardball. If you keep pushing to get it back, they just might arrange for you to turn up dead. . . ."

But riding the elevator up to his apartment, thinking about what had happened, trying to come to terms with it, Kessler realized it wasn't death that scared him. What chilled him was thinking about his wife. Julie had waited till he'd slept. Had, perhaps, watched the clock on the bedside table. Had got out of bed at the appointed hour and padded to the door and ever-so-quietly opened it for the man carrying the black box. . . .

And she had done it because Worldtalk had asked her to. Worldtalk was her husband, her children, her parents. Perhaps most of all her dreadful parents.

And maybe in the long run, what had happened to him, Kessler thought as the elevator reached his floor, was that the Dissolve Depression had done its work on him. For decades the social structures that created nuclear families, that kept families whole and together, had eroded, had finally broken down completely. Broken homes made broken homes made broken homes. The big corporations, meanwhile, consumed the little ones, and, becoming then unmanageably big, looked for ways to stabilize themselves. They chose the proven success of the Japanese system: the corporation as an extension of the family. You inculcate your workers with a fanatic sense of loyalty and belonging. You personalize everything. And they go along with that or they lose their jobs. So maybe it started with the Dissolve Depression: five years earlier, a Moslem Jihad terrorist group had set off a controlled hydrogen bomb explosion in the upper atmosphere; the explosion was contained, directed outward; but the bomb's ElectroMagnetic Pulse—the EMP effect—swept over the continent. The defense systems were shielded. But not the banks. The pulse literally burnt up the computer memories of millions of bank accounts. Hundreds of banks collapsed, and the economy with them.

So now jobs were precious. Jobs were life. So you embraced the new Corporation as home and family system. The breakdown of the traditional family structures reinforced the process. And you put your employer above your true family. You let its agents in to destroy your husband's new career. . . .

And here we are, he thought, as he walked into the apartment. There she is, making us both a drink, so we can once more become cordial strangers sharing a convenience apartment and a convenient sex life.

"Aren't you coming to bed?" she called from the bedroom.

He sat on the couch, holding his glass up beside his ear, shaking it

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just enough so he could listen to the tinkle of the ice cubes. The sound made him feel good and he wondered why. It made him visualize wind chimes of frosted glass. . . . His mother's wind chimes. His mother standing on the front porch, smiling absently, watching him play, and now and then she would reach up and tinkle the wind chimes with her finger. . . . He swallowed another tot of vodka to smear over the chalky scratch of loneliness.

"You really ought to get some sleep, Jimmy." A faint note of strain in her voice.

He was scared to go in there.

This is stupid, he thought. I don't know for sure it was her.

He forced himself to put the glass down, to stand, to walk to the bedroom, to do it all as if he weren't forcing himself through the membranes of his mistrust. He stood in the doorway and looked at her for a moment. She was wearing her silk lingerie. Her back to him. He could see her face reflected in the window to her left. Her eyes were open wide. In them he saw determination and self-disgust and he knew she had contacted them and the strangers were going to do it to him again. They would come and take out more this time, his conversation with Bascomb, his misgivings. They would take away the hush money they had paid him since he had shown he was unwilling to accept it without pushing to get back what he had lost. . . . They would take his argument with Julie . . .

Go along with it, he told himself.

That would be the intelligent solution. Let them do it. Sweet nepenthe. The pain and the fear and the anger would go with the memories. And he would have his relationship with his wife back. Such as it was.

He thought about it for a moment. She turned to look at him.

"No," he said finally. "No, we don't have enough between us to make it worthwhile. No. Tell them I said next they'll have to try and kill me."

She stared at him. Then she lay back; and looked at the ceiling.

He closed the bedroom door softly behind him, and went to the closet for his coat.

They hadn't taken the money yet. It was still there in his account. He had gone to an all night banking kiosk, sealed himself in, and now he looked at the figure, $NB 760,000 and felt a kind of glow. He punched for the telephone, and called Charlie Chesterton.

The screen asked him, YOU WANT VISUAL? No, he told it, not yet.

"Sap?" came Charlie's voice. "Huzatunwushant?"

Wake Charlie out of a sound sleep, and he talked Technicki. He'd said, *What's happenin'? Who's that and what do you want?*

"Talk standard with me, Charlie. It's—"

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"Hey, my man Kessler, what's happening, man! Hey how come no visual?"

"I didn't know what you were doing. I'm ever discreet." He punched for visual and a small TV image of Charlie appeared below the phone's keyboard. Charlie wore a triple mohawk, each fin a different color, each color significant; red in the middle for Technicki Radical Unionist; blue on the right for his profession, video tech, green on the left for his neighborhood: New Brooklyn. He grinned, showing front teeth imprinted with his initials in gold, another tacky technicki fad. And Charlie wore a picture t-shirt that showed a movie: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis,* now moving through the flood scene.

"You went to sleep wearing your movie t-shirt, you oughta turn it off, wear out the batteries."

"Recharges from sunlight," Charlie said. "You call me to talk about my sleeping habits?"

"Need your help. Right now, I need the contact numbers for that Shanghai bank that takes the transferrals under a code of anonymity. . . ."

"I told you man, that's like, the border of legality, and maybe over it. You understand that first, right?"

Kessler nodded.

"Okay. Set your screen to record . . . "

Bascomb's office was too warm; Bascomb had a problem with his circulation. The walls were a milky yellow that seemed to quicken the heat somehow. Bascomb sat behind the blond-wood desk, wearing a stenciled-on three-piece suit, smiling a smile of polite bafflement. Kessler sat across from him, feeling he was on some kind of treadmill, because Bascomb just kept saying, "I really am quite sure no such meeting took place." He chuckled. "I know the club very well and I'm sure I'd remember if I'd been there that night. Haven't been there for a month."

"You weren't enthusiastic about it, but you ended by telling me we'd take 'em on." But the words were ashes in Kessler's mouth. He knew what had happened because there was not even the faintest trace of duplicity or nervousness on Bascomb's face. Bascomb really didn't remember. "So you won't represent me on this," Kessler went on. Only half a question.

"We really have no experience with brain tampering—"

"I could get the court files to prove that you have. But they'd only . . . " He shook his head. Despair was something he could smell and taste and feel, like acid rain. "They'd tamper with you again. Just to make their point."

He walked out of the office, hurrying, thinking: They'll have the place under surveillance. But no one stopped him outside.

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Charlie was off on one of his amateur analyses, and there was nothing Kessler could do, he had to listen, because Charlie was covering for him.

". . . I mean," Charlie was saying, "now your average Technicki speaks standard English like an infant, am I right, and can't read except command codes, and learned it all from vidteaching, and he's trained to do this and that and to fix this and that but he's, like, socially inhibited from rising in the ranks because the socio-economic elite speaks standard good and reads—"

"If they really want to, they can learn what they need, like you did," Kessler said irritably. He was standing at the window, looking out at the empty, glossy ceramic streets. The artificial island, a boro-annex of Brooklyn anchored in the harbor, was almost deserted at this hour; everyone had either gone into the city, or home to holo, or into a tavern. The floating boros were notoriously dull. The squat floboro housing, rounded off at the corners like a row of molars, stood in silence, a few windows glowing like radarscopes against the night.

But they could be watching me, Kessler thought. A hundred ways they could be watching me and I'd see nothing.

He turned, stepped away from the window. Charlie was pacing, arms clasped behind him, head bent, playing the part of the young, boldly theorizing leader of radical politicos.

The apartment was crowded with irregular shelves of books and boxes of software and cassettes and compact disks; Charlie had hung silk scarves in The Three Colors, blurring like multicolor smoke. "I mean," Charlie went on, "you can talk about our job security but it's a sham—"

A warning chill: and Kessler turned, looked out the window. Three stories down she was a powder-blue keyhole shape against the faint petroleum rainbow filminess of the street. She was looking at the numbers.

She might have guessed, he told himself. She met Charlie once. She might have looked Charlie's address up in ref disk. She went to the front door. Charlie's bell chimed. He went to the screen and looked. "It's your wife," he said. "You want me to tell her you went overseas? Japan?"

"Let her in."

"Are you kidding, man? You are, right? She was the one who—"

"Just let her in." She got it from the address list, he told himself. There was a cocktail of emotions in him. There was a relief at seeing her, shaken in with something that buzzed like a smoke alarm and it wasn't till she was at the door that he realized that the sensation was terror. And then Julie was standing in the doorway, against the light of the hallway. She looked beautiful. The light behind her abruptly cut: an energy saving device sensing that no one was now in the hall; suddenly

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she stood framed in darkness. The buzzing fizzed up, and overwhelmed the relief. His mouth was dry.

Looking disgustedly at Kessler, Charlie shut the door behind her.

Kessler stared at her. Her eyes flickered, her mouth opened, and shut, and she shook her head. She looked drained.

And Kessler knew.

"They sent you. They told you where to find me," he said.

"They—want the money back," she said. "They want you to come with me."

He shook his head. "Don't you get sick of being puppeted?"

She looked at the window. Her face was blank. "You don't understand."

"Do you know why they do it, why they train you in that Americanized Japanese job conditioning stuff? To save themselves money. Because it eliminates unions."

"They have their reasons, sure. Mostly efficiency."

"I know. What's the slogan? 'Efficiency is friendship.' "

She looked embarrassed. "That's not—" She shrugged. "A Corporate Family is just as valid as any other. It's something you couldn't understand. I—I'll lose my job, Jimmy. If you don't come." She said *lose my job* the way Kessler would have said, *lose my life.*

Kessler said, "I'll think about going with you if you tell me what it was . . . what it was they took."

"They—took it from me too."

"I don't believe that. I never believed it. I think they left it intact in you, so you could watch to see if I stumbled on it again. I think you really loved them trusting you. Worldtalk is Mommy and Daddy and Mommy and Daddy trusted you . . . "

Her mouth twisted with resentment. "You bastard. I can't—"

"Yeah, you can. You have to. Otherwise Charlie and I are going out the back way and we're going to cause endless trouble for Worldtalk. And I know you, Julie—I'd know if you were making it up. So tell me what it was, what it really was."

She sighed. "I only know what you told me. You pointed out that P.R. companies manipulate the media for their clients without the public knowing it most of the time. They use their connections and channels to plant information or disinformation in news-sheet articles, on newsvid, in movies, in political speeches. So . . . " She paused and went on wearily, shrugging off her irritation. "So they're manipulating people, and the public gets a distorted view of what's going on because of special interests. You worked up an editing system that sensed probable examples of, uh, I think the phrases you used were 'implanted information' or 'special interest distortion'. So they could be weeded out. You called it the Media Alarm System." She let out a long breath. "I didn't know they'd go so

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far—I thought they'd buy out your system. In a way they did. I *had* to mention it at Worldtalk. If I didn't I would've been . . . disloyal." She said *disloyal* wincing, knowing what he would think.

But it was Charlie who said it: "What about loyalty to Jim Kessler?"

Her hand fluttered a dismissal. "It doesn't matter at this point whether it was wrong or right. It's too late. They *know*. . . . Jimmy, are you coming?"

Kessler was thinking about the Media Alarm System. It didn't sound familiar—but it sounded *right*. He said, slowly, "No. You can help me. What they did is illegal as hell. If you testify, we can beat them."

"Jimmy, if I thought they—no, no. I—" She broke off, staring at his waist. "Don't be stupid. That's not—" She took a step back, and put her hand in her purse.

Kessler and Charlie looked at each other, traded puzzlement. When Kessler looked back at Julie, she had a gun in her hand. It was a small blue-metal pistol, its barrel tiny as a pencil, and that tiny barrel meant it fired explosive bullets. *They* had given it to her.

"Do you know what that gun will do?" Charlie was saying. "Those little explosive bullets will splash him all over the wall." His voice shook. He took a step toward her.

She pressed back against the door and said, "Charlie, if you come closer to me I'll shoot him." Charlie stopped. The room seemed to keen ultrasonically with sheer imminence. She went on, the words coming out in a rush: "Why don't you ask him what that thing in his hand would do to me, Charlie. Shall we? Ask him that. Jimmy has the same kind of gun. With the same goddamn bullets." Her voice was too high; she was breathing fast. Her knuckles white on the gun.

Kessler's arms were hanging at his side, his hands empty.

"Lower the gun, Julie, and we can talk," Charlie said gently.

"I'll lower mine when he lowers his," she said hoarsely.

"He isn't holding a gun," Charlie said.

She was staring at a space about three feet in front of Kessler's chest. She was seeing the gun there. He wanted to say, *Julie, they tampered with you*. He could only croak, "Julie—"

She shouted, "Don't!" and raised the gun. And then everything was moving: Kessler threw himself down. Charlie jumped at her, and the wall behind Kessler jumped outward toward the street.

Two hot metal hands clapped Kessler's head between them and he shouted with pain and thought he was dead. But it was only a noise, the noise of the wall exploding outward. Chips of wall pattered down; smoke sucked out through the four foot hole in the wall into the winter night.

Kessler got up, shaky, his ears ringing. He looked around, and saw

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Charlie straddling Julie. He had the gun in his hand and she was face down, sobbing.

"Gogidoutere," Charlie said, lapsing into Technicki, his face white.

"Get off her," Kessler said. Charlie stood up beside her. "Julie, look at me," Kessler said softly. She tilted her head back, an expression of diginified defiance trembling precariously in her face. Then her eyes widened, and she looked at his hips. She was seeing him holding a gun there. "I don't have a gun, Julie. They put that into you. Now I'm going to *get* a gun. . . . Give me the gun, Charlie." Without taking his eyes off her, he put his hand out. Charlie hesitated, then laid the gun in Kessler's open palm. She blinked, then narrowed her eyes.

"So now you've got two guns." She shrugged.

He shook his head. "Get up." Moving stiffly, she shood up. "Now go over there to Charlie's bed. He's got black bedsheets. You see them? Take one off. Just pull it off and bring it over here." She started to say something, anger lines punctuating her mouth, and he said quickly, "Don't talk yet. Do it!" She went to the bed, pulled the black satin sheet off, and dragged it over to him. Charlie gaped, and muttered that the the cops would come because of the explosion and would hold you for days and weeks till they were sure of what had happened, but Kessler had a kind of furious calm on him then, and he knew what he was going to do, and if it didn't work then he'd let the acid rain bleach his bones white as a warning to other travelers come to this poisoned well. This woman. He said, "Now tear up the sheet—sorry, man, I'll replace it—and make a blindfold. Good. Right. Now tie it over my eyes. Use the tape on the table to make the blindfold light-proof."

Moving in slow motion, she blindfolded him. Darkness whispered down around him. She taped it thoroughly in place. "Now am I still pointing two guns at you?"

"Yes." But there was uncertainty in her voice.

"Now take a step to one side. No, take several steps, very softly, move around a lot." The soft sounds of her movement. Her gasp. "Is the gun following you around the room?"

"Yes. Yes. One of them."

"But how is that possible? *I can't see you!* And why did I let you blindfold me if I'm ready and willing to shoot you?"

"You look weird like that, man. Ridiculous and scary," Charlie said.

"Shut up, Charlie, will you? Answer me, Julie! I can't see you! How can I follow you with the guns?"

"I don't know!" Her voice cracking.

"Take the guns from my hands! Shoot me! Do it!"

She made a short hissing sound, and took the gun from his hand, and he braced to die. But she pulled the blindfold away and looked at him.

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Looked into his eyes.

She let the gun drop to the floor. Kessler said, softly: "You see now? They did it to you. You, one of the 'family.' The corporate 'family' means just exactly nothing to them."

She looked at his hands. "No gun. No gun." Dreamily. "Gun's gone. Everything's different."

Siren warblings. Coming closer.

She sank to her knees. "Just exactly nothing to them," she said. "Just exactly nothing." Her face crumpled. She looked as if she'd fallen into herself, some inner scaffolding had been kicked out of place.

Sirens and lights outside. A chrome fluttering in the smoky gap where the wall had been blown outward; a police surveillance bird. It looked like a bird, hovering in place with its oversized aluminum hummingbird's wings; but instead of a head it had a small camera lens. A transmitted voice droned from a grid on its silvery belly: *"This is the police. You are now being observed and taped. Do not attempt to leave. The front door has been breached. Police officers will arrive in seconds to take your statements. Repeat—"*

"Oh, I heard you," Julie said, in a hollow voice. "I'll make a statement all right. I've got a lot to tell you. Oh yeah." She laughed sadly. "I'll make a statement . . . "

Kessler bent down, and touched her arm. "Hey . . . I—"

She drew back from him. "Don't touch me. Just don't! You love to be right. I'm going to tell them. Just don't touch me."

But he stayed with her. He and Charlie stood looking at the blue smoke drifting out the ragged hole in the wall; at the mechanical, camera-eyed bird looking back at them.

He stayed with her, as he always would, and they listened for the footsteps outside the door. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 80)

SECOND SOLUTION TO PLAYING SAFE ON THE BAGEL

The safe spot is NOWHERE (no W here).

Now for an entertaining problem that won't be answered because that would spoil the fun. Imagine a chess king placed on one of the letters. By moving one cell at a time in any direction—up, down, left, right, and diagonally—you can spell various words. For example, you can spell such names as LEM, TUTU, and POPOV, and words such as GNU, ELM, VOW, NUTS, MELTS, STUNTS, and STUNG.

Your task is to spell an adjective that describes the state of Ensign Pulver after he has imbibed too many Martian martinis.

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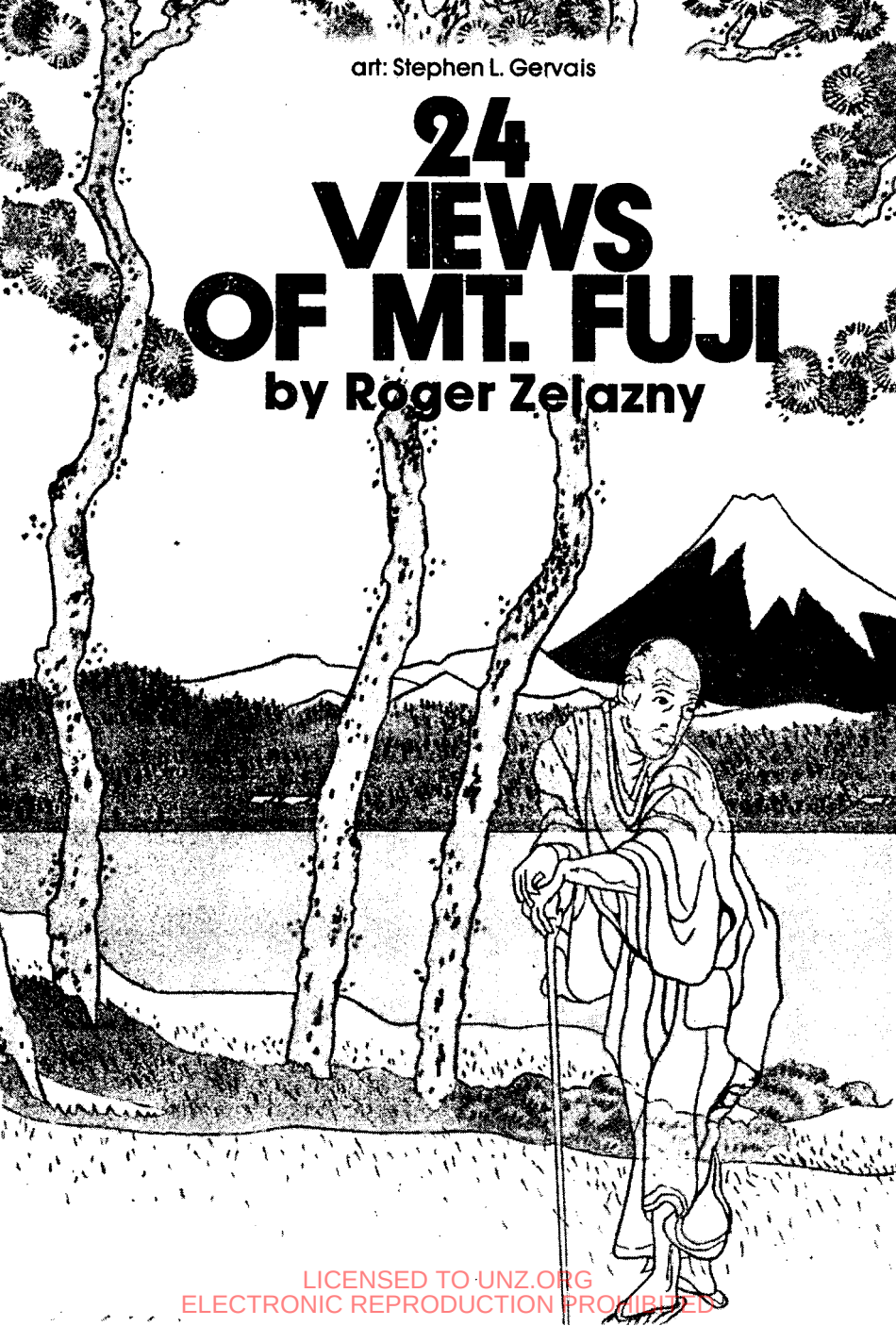
art: Stephen L. Gervais

24 VIEWS OF MT. FUJI

by Roger Zelazny



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This master of science fiction, winner of numerous Hugo and Nebula awards, needs little introduction besides the simple fact that we are proud to be publishing this beautiful story.

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Kit lives, though he is buried not far from here; and I am dead, though I watch the days-end light pinking cloudstreaks above the mountain in the distance, a tree in the foreground for suitable contrast. The old barrel-man is dust; his cask, too, I daresay. Kit said that he loved me and I said I loved him. We were both telling the truth. But love can mean many things. It can be an instrument of aggression or a function of disease.

My name is Mari. I do not know whether my life will fit the forms I move to meet on this pilgrimage. Nor death. Not that tidiness becomes me. So begin anywhere. Either arcing of the circle, like that vanished barrel's hoop, should lead to the same place. I have come to kill. I bear the hidden death, to cast against the secret life. Both are intolerable. I have weighed them. If I were an outsider I do not know which I would choose. But I am here, me, Mari, following the magic footsteps. Each moment is entire, though each requires its past. I do not understand causes, only sequences. And I am long weary of reality-reversal games. Things will have to grow clearer with each successive layer of my journey, and like the delicate play of light upon my magic mountain they must change. I must die a little and live a little each moment.

I begin here because we lived near here. I visited the place earlier. It is, of course, changed. I recall his hand upon my arm, his sometime smiling face, his stacks of books, the cold, flat eye of his computer terminal, his hands again, positioned in meditation, his smile different then. Distant and near. His hands, upon me. The power of his programs, to crack codes, to build them. His hands. Deadly. Who would have thought he would surrender those rapid-striking weapons, delicate instruments, twisters of bodies? Or myself? Paths . . . Hands . . .

I have come back. It is all. I do not know whether it is enough.

The old barrel-maker within the hoop of his labor . . . Half-full, half-empty, half-active, half-passive . . . Shall I make a yin-yang of that famous print? Shall I let it stand for Kit and myself? Shall I view it as the great Zero? Or as infinity? Or is all of this too obvious? One of those observations best left unstated? I am not always subtle. Let it stand. Fuji stands within it. And is it not Fuji one must climb to give an accounting of one's life before God or the gods?

I have no intention of climbing Fuji and accounting for myself, to God or to anything else. Only the insecure and the uncertain require justification. I do what I must. If the deities have any questions they can come down from Fuji and ask me. Otherwise, this is the closest commerce between us. That which transcends should only be admired from afar.

Indeed. I of all people should know this. I, who have tasted transcendence. I know, too, that death is the only god who comes when you call.

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Traditionally, the *henro*—the pilgrim—would dress all in white. I do not. White does not become me, and my pilgrimage is a private thing, a secret thing, for so long as I can keep it so. I wear a red blouse today and a light khaki jacket and slacks, tough leather hiking shoes; I have bound my hair; a pack on my back holds my belongings. I do carry a stick, however, partly for the purpose of support, which I require upon occasion; partly, too, as a weapon should the need arise. I am adept at its use in both these functions. A staff is also said to symbolize one's faith in a pilgrimage. Faith is beyond me. I will settle for hope.

In the pocket of my jacket is a small book containing reproductions of twenty-four of Hokusai's forty-six prints of Mt. Fuji. It was a gift, long ago. Tradition also stands against a pilgrim's traveling alone, for practical purposes of safety as well as for companionship. The spirit of Hokusai then is my companion, for surely it resides in the places I would visit if it resides anywhere. There is no other companion I would desire at the moment, and what is a Japanese drama without a ghost?

Having viewed this scene and thought my thoughts and felt my feelings, I have begun. I have lived a little, I have died a little. My way will not be entirely on foot. But much of it will be. There are certain things I must avoid in this journey of greetings and farewells. Simplicity is my cloak of darkness, and perhaps the walking will be good for me.

I must watch my health.

2. Mt. Fuji from a Teahouse at Yoshida

I study the print: A soft blueness to the dawn sky, Fuji to the left, seen through the teahouse window by two women; other bowed, drowsing figures like puppets on a shelf. . . .

It is not this way here, now. They are gone, like the barrel-maker—the people, the teahouse, that dawn. Only the mountain and the print remain of the moment. But that is enough.

I sit in the dining room of the hostel where I spent the night, my breakfast eaten, a pot of tea before me. There are other diners present, but none near me. I chose this table because of the window's view, which approximates that of the print. Hokusai, my silent companion, may be smiling. The weather was sufficiently clement for me to have camped again last night, but I am deadly serious in my pilgrimage to vanished scenes in this life-death journey I have undertaken. It is partly a matter of seeking and partly a matter of waiting. It is quite possible that it may be cut short at any time. I hope not, but the patterns of life have seldom corresponded to my hopes—or, for that matter, to logic, desire, emptiness, or any patterns of my own against which I have measured them.

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All of this is not the proper attitude and occupation for a fresh day. I will drink my tea and regard the mountain. The sky changes even as I watch. . . .

Changes . . . I must be careful on departing this place. There are precincts to be avoided, precautions to be taken. I have worked out all of my movements—from putting down the cup, rising, turning, recovering my gear, walking—until I am back in the country again. I must still make patterns, for the world is a number-line, everywhere dense. I am taking a small chance in being here.

I am not so tired as I had thought I would be from all yesterday's walking, and I take this as a good sign. I have tried to keep in decent shape, despite everything. A scroll hangs on the wall to my right depicting a tiger, and I want this, too, for a good omen. I was born in the Year of the Tiger, and the strength and silent movements of the big striped cat are what I most need. I drink to you, Shere Khan, cat who walks by himself. We must be hard at the right time, soft at the proper moment. Timing . . .

We'd an almost telepathic bond to begin with, Kit and I. It drew us to each other, grew stronger in our years together. Empathy, proximity, meditation . . . Love? Then love can be a weapon. Spin its coin and it comes up yang.

Burn bright, Shere Khan, in the jungle of the heart. This time we are the hunter. Timing is all—and *suki,* the opening . . .

I watch the changes of the sky until a uniform brightness is achieved, holds steady. I finish my tea. I rise and fetch my gear, don my backpack, take up my staff. I head for the short hall which leads to a side door.

"Madam! Madam!"

It is one of the place's employees, a small man with a startled expression.

"Yes?"

He nods at my pack.

"You are leaving us?"

"I am."

"You have not checked out."

"I have left payment for my room in an envelope on the dresser. It says 'cashier' on it. I learned the proper amount last night."

"You must check out at the desk."

"I did not check in at the desk. I am not checking out at the desk. If you wish, I will accompany you back to the room, to show you where I left the payment."

"I am sorry, but it must be done with the cashier."

"I am sorry also, but I have left payment and I will not go to the desk."

"It is irregular. I will have to call the manager."

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I sigh.

"No," I say. "I do not want that. I will go to the lobby and handle the checking out as I did the checking in."

I retrace my steps. I turn left toward the lobby.

"Your money," he says. "If you left it in the room you must get it and bring it."

I shake my head.

"I left the key, also."

I enter the lobby. I go to the chair in the corner, the one farthest from the work area. I seat myself.

The small man has followed me.

"Would you tell them at the desk that I wish to check out?" I ask him.

"Your room number. . . ?"

"Seventeen."

He bows slightly and crosses to the counter. He speaks with a woman who glances at me several times. I cannot hear their words. Finally, he takes a key from her and departs. The woman smiles at me.

"He will bring the key and the money from your room," she says. "Have you enjoyed your stay?"

"Yes," I answer. "If it is being taken care of, I will leave now."

I begin to rise.

"Please wait," she says, "until the paperwork is done and I have given you your receipt."

"I do not want the receipt."

"I am required to give it to you."

I sit back down. I hold my staff between my knees. I clasp it with both hands. If I try to leave now she will probably call the manager. I do not wish to attract even more attention to myself. I wait. I control my breathing. I empty my mind.

After a time the man returns. He hands her the key and the envelope. She shuffles papers. She inserts a form into a machine. There is a brief stutter of keys. She withdraws the form and regards it. She counts the money in my envelope.

"You have the exact amount, Mrs. Smith. Here is your receipt."

She peels the top sheet from the bill.

There comes a peculiar feeling in the air, as if a lightning stroke had fallen here but a second ago. I rise quickly to my feet.

"Tell me," I say, "is this place a private business or part of a chain?"

I am moving forward by then, for I know the answer before she says it. The feeling is intensified, localized.

"We are a chain," she replies, looking about uneasily.

"With central bookkeeping?"

"Yes."

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Behind the special place where the senses come together to describe reality I see the form of a bat-like epigon taking shape beside her. She already feels its presence but does not understand. My way is *mo chih ch'u,* as the Chinese say—immediate action, without thought or hesitation—as I reach the desk, place my staff upon it at the proper angle, lean forward as if to take my receipt and nudge the staff so that it slides and falls, passing over the countertop, its small metal tip coming to rest against the housing of the computer terminal. Immediately, the overhead lights go out. The epigon collapses and dissipates.

"Power failure," I observe, raising my staff and turning away. "Good day."

I hear her calling for a boy to check the circuit box.

I make my way out of the lobby and visit a rest room where I take a pill, just in case. Then I return to the short hall, traverse it and depart the building. I had assumed it would happen sooner or later, so I was not unprepared. The microminiature circuitry within my staff was sufficient to the occasion, and while I would rather it had occurred later perhaps it was good for me that it happened when it did. I feel more alive, more alert from this demonstration of danger. This feeling, this knowledge, will be of use to me.

And it did not reach me. It accomplished nothing. The basic situation is unchanged. I am happy to have benefited at so small a price.

Still, I wish to be away and into the countryside, where I am strong and the other is weak.

I walk into the fresh day, a piece of my life upon the breakfast moment's mountain.

3. Mt. Fuji from Hodogaya

I find a place of twisted pines along the Tokaido, and I halt to view Fuji through them. The travelers who pass in the first hour or so of my vigil do not look like Hokusai's, but no matter. The horse, the sedan chair, the blue garments, the big hats—faded into the past, traveling forever on the print now. Merchant or nobleman, thief or servant—I choose to look upon them as pilgrims of one sort or another, if only into, through and out of life. My morbidity, I hasten to add, is excusable, in that I have required additional medication. I am stable now, however, and do not know whether medication or meditation is responsible for my heightened perception of the subtleties of the light. Fuji seems almost to move within my gazing.

Pilgrims . . . I am minded of the wanderings of Matsuo Bashō, who said that all of us are travelers every minute of our lives. I recall also

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his reflections upon the lagoons of Matsushima and Kisagata—the former possessed of a cheerful beauty, the latter the beauty of a weeping countenance. I think upon the complexion and expressions of Fuji and I am baffled. Sorrow? Penance? Joy? Exaltation? They merge and shift. I lack the genius of Bashō to capture them all in a single character. And even he . . . I do not know. Like speaks to like, but speech must cross a gulf. Fascination always includes some lack of understanding. It is enough for this moment, to view.

Pilgrims . . . I think, too, of Chaucer as I regard the print. His travelers had a good time. They told each other dirty stories and romances and tales with morals attached. They ate and they drank and they kidded each other. Canterbury was their Fuji. They had a party along the way. The book ends before they arrive. Fitting.

I am not a humorless bitch. It may be that Fuji is really laughing at me. If so, I would like very much to join in. I really do not enjoy moods such as this, and a bit of meditation interruptus would be welcome if only the proper object would present itself. Life's soberer mysteries cannot be working at top-speed all the time. If they can take a break I want one, too. Tomorrow, perhaps . . .

Damn! My presence must at least be suspected or the epigon would not have come. Still, I have been very careful. A suspicion is not a certainty, and I am sure that my action was sufficiently prompt to preclude confirmation. My present location is beyond reach as well as knowledge. I have retreated into Hokusai's art.

I could have lived out the rest of my days upon Oregon's quiet coast. The place was not without its satisfactions. But I believe it was Rilke who said that life is a game we must begin playing before we have learned the rules. Do we ever? Are there really rules?

Perhaps I read too many poets.

But something that seems a rule to me requires I make this effort. Justice, duty, vengeance, defense—must I weigh each of these and assign it a percentage of that which moves me? I am here because I am here, because I am following rules—whatever they may be. My understanding is limited to sequences.

His is not. He could always make the intuitive leap. Kit was a scholar, a scientist, a poet. Such riches. I am smaller in all ways.

Kokuzo, guardian of those born in the Year of the Tiger, break this mood. I do not want it. It is not me. Let it be an irritation of old lesions, even a renewal of the demyelination. But do not let it be me. And end it soon. I am sick in my heart and my reasons are good ones. Give me the strength to detach myself from them, Catcher in the Bamboo, lord of those who wear the stripes. Take away the bleakness, gather me together, inform me with strength. Balance me.

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I watch the play of light. From somewhere I hear the singing of children. After a time a gentle rain begins to fall. I don my poncho and continue to watch. I am very weary, but I want to see Fuji emerge from the fog which has risen. I sip water and a bit of brandy. Only the barest outline remains. Fuji is become a ghost mountain within a Taoist painting. I wait until the sky begins to darken. I know that the mountain will not come to me again this day, and I must find a dry place to sleep. These must be my lessons from Hodogaya: Tend to the present. Do not try to polish ideals. Have sense enough to get in out of the rain.

I stumble off through a small wood. A shed, a barn, a garage. . . . Anything that stands between me and the sky will do.

After a time I find such a place. No god addresses my dreaming.

4. Mt. Fuji from the Tamagawa

I compare the print with the reality. Not bad this time. The horse and the man are absent from the shore, but there is a small boat out on the water. Not the same sort of boat, to be sure, and I cannot tell whether it bears firewood, but it will suffice. I would be surprised to find perfect congruence. The boat is moving away from me. The pink of the dawn sky is reflected upon the water's farther reaches and from the snow-streaks on Fuji's dark shoulder. The boatman in the print is poling his way outward. Charon? No, I am more cheerful today than I was at Hodogaya. Too small a vessel for the *Narrenschiff,* too slow for the Flying Dutchman. "La navicella." Yes. "La navicella del mio ingegno"—"the little bark of my wit" on which Dante hoisted sail for that second realm, Purgatory. Fuji then . . . Perhaps so. The hells beneath, the heavens above, Fuji between—way station, stopover, terminal. A decent metaphor for a pilgrim who could use a purge. Appropriate. For it contains the fire and the earth as well as the air, as I gaze across the water. Transition, change. I am passing.

The serenity is broken and my reverie ended as a light airplane, yellow in color, swoops out over the water from someplace to my left. Moments later the insect-like buzzing of its single engine reaches me. It loses altitude quickly, skimming low over the water, then turns and traces its way back, this time swinging in above the shoreline. As it nears the point where it will pass closest to me, I detect a flash of reflected light within the cockpit. A lens? If it is, it is too late to cover myself against its questing eye. My hand dips into my breast pocket and withdraws a small gray cylinder of my own. I flick off its endcaps with my thumbnail as I raise it to peer through the eyepiece. A moment to locate the target, another to focus . . .

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The pilot is a man, and as the plane banks away I catch only his unfamiliar profile. Was that a gold earring upon his left earlobe?

The plane is away, in the direction from which it had come. Nor does it return.

I am shaken. Someone had flown by for the sole purpose of taking a look at me. How had he found me? And what did he want? If he represents what I fear most then this is a completely different angle of attack than any I had anticipated.

I clench my hand into a fist and I curse softly. Unprepared. Is that to be the story of my entire life? Always ready for the wrong thing at the right time? Always neglecting the thing that matters most?

Like Kendra?

She is under my protection, is one of the reasons I am here. If I succeed in this enterprise I will have fulfilled at least a part of my obligation to her. Even if she never knows, even if she never understands . . .

I push all thoughts of my daughter from my mind. If he even suspected . . .

The present. Return to the present. Do not spill energy into the past. I stand at the fourth station of my pilgrimage and someone takes my measure. At the third station an epigon tried to take form. I took extreme care in my return to Japan. I am here on false papers, traveling under an assumed name. The years have altered my appearance somewhat and I have assisted them to the extent of darkening my hair and my complexion, defying my customary preferences in clothing, altering my speech patterns, my gait, my eating habits—all of these things easier for me than most others because of the practice I've had in the past. The past . . . Again, damn it! Could it have worked against me even in this matter? Damn the past! An epigon and a possible human observer this close together. Yes, I am normally paranoid and have been for many years, for good reason. I cannot allow my knowledge of the fact to influence my judgment now, however. I must think clearly.

I see three possibilities. The first is that the flyby means nothing, that it would have occurred had anyone else been standing here—or no one. A joyride, or a search for something else.

It may be so, but my survival instinct will not permit me to accept it. I must assume that this is not the case. Therefore, someone is looking for me. This is either connected with the manifestation of the epigon or it is not. If it is not, a large bag of live bait has just been opened at my feet and I have no idea how to begin sorting through the intertwined twistings. There are so many possibilities from my former profession, though I had considered all of these long closed off. Perhaps I should not have. Seeking there for causes seems an impossible undertaking.

The third possibility is the most frightening: that there is a connection

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between the epigon and the flight. If things have reached the point where both epigons and human agents can be employed then I may well be doomed to failure. But even more than this, it will mean that the game has taken on another, awesome dimension, an aspect which I had never considered. It will mean that everyone on Earth is in far greater peril than I had assumed, that I am the only one aware of it and that my personal duel has been elevated to a struggle of global proportions. I cannot take the risk of assigning it to my paranoia now. I must assume the worst.

My eyes overflow. I know how to die. I once knew how to lose with grace and detachment. I can no longer afford this luxury. If I bore any hidden notion of yielding I banish it now. My weapon is a frail one but I must wield it. If the gods come down from Fuji and tell me, "Daughter, it is our will that you desist," I must still continue in this to the end, though I suffer in the hells of the *Yü Li Ch'ao Chuan* forever. Never before have I realized the force of fate.

I sink slowly to my knees. For it is a god that I must vanquish.

My tears are no longer for myself.

5. Mt. Fuji from Fukagawa in Edo

Tokyo. Ginza and confusion. Traffic and pollution. Noise, color and faces, faces, faces. I once loved scenes such as this, but I have been away from cities for too long. And to return to a city such as this is overpowering, almost paralyzing.

Neither is it the old Edo of the print, and I take yet another chance in coming here, though caution rides my every move.

It is difficult to locate a bridge approachable from an angle proper to simulate the view of Fuji beneath it, in the print. The water is of the wrong color and I wrinkle my nose at the smell; this bridge is not that bridge; there are no peaceful fisher-folk here; and gone the greenery. Hokusai exhales sharply and stares as I do at Fuji-san beneath the metal span. His bridge was a graceful rainbow of wood, product of gone days.

Yet there is something to the thrust and dream of any bridge. Hart Crane could find poetry in those of this sort. "Harp and altar, of the fury fused . . ."

And Nietzsche's bridge that is humanity, stretching on toward the superhuman . . .

No. I do not like that one. Better had I never become involved with that which transcends. Let it be my *pons asinorum.*

With but a slight movement of my head I adjust the perspective. Now it seems as if Fuji supports the bridge and without his presence it will

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be broken like Bifrost, preventing the demons of the past from attacking our present Asgard—or perhaps the demons of the future from storming our ancient Asgard.

I move my head again. Fuji drops. The bridge remains intact. Shadow and substance.

The backfire of a truck causes me to tremble. I am only just arrived and I feel I have been here too long. Fuji seems too distant and I too exposed. I must retreat.

Is there a lesson in this or only a farewell?

A lesson, for the soul of the conflict hangs before my eyes: I will not be dragged across Nietzsche's bridge.

Come, Hokusai, *ukiyo-e* Ghost of Christmas Past, show me another scene.

6. Mt. Fuji from Kajikazawa

Misted, mystic Fuji over water. Air that comes clean to my nostrils. There is even a fisherman almost where he should be, his pose less dramatic than the original, his garments more modern, above the infinite Fourier series of waves advancing upon the shore.

On my way to this point I visited a small chapel surrounded by a stone wall. It was dedicated to Kwannon, goddess of compassion and mercy, comforter in times of danger and sorrow. I entered. I loved her when I was a girl, until I learned that she was really a man. Then I felt cheated, almost betrayed. She was Kwan Yin in China, and just as merciful, but she came there from India where she had been a bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara, a man—"the Lord Who Looks Down with Compassion". In Tibet he is Chen-re-zi—"He of the Compassionate Eyes"—who gets incarnated regularly as the Dalai Lama. I did not trust all of this fancy footwork on his/her part, and Kwannon lost something of her enchantment for me with this smattering of history and anthropology. Yet I entered. We revisit the mental landscape of childhood in times of trouble. I stayed for a time and the child within me danced for a moment then fell still.

I watch the fisherman above those waves, smaller versions of Hokusai's big one which has always symbolized death for me. The little deaths rolling about him, the man hauls in a silver-sided catch. I recall a tale from the Arabian Nights, another of American Indian origin. I might also see Christian symbolism, or a Jungian archetype. But I remember that Ernest Hemingway told Bernard Berenson that the secret of his greatest book was that there was no symbolism. The sea was the sea, the old man an old man, the boy a boy, the marlin a marlin, and the

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sharks the same as other sharks. People empower these things themselves, groping beneath the surface, always looking for more. With me it is at least understandable. I spent my earliest years in Japan, my later childhood in the United States. There is a part of me which likes to see things through allusions and touched with mystery. And the American part never trusts anything and is always looking for the real story behind the front one.

As a whole, I would say that it is better not to trust, though lines of interpretation must be drawn at some point before the permutations of causes in which I indulge overflow my mind. I am so, nor will I abandon this quality of character which has served me well in the past. This does not invalidate Hemingway's viewpoint any more than his does mine, for no one holds a monopoly on wisdom. In my present situation, however, I believe that mine has a higher survival potential, for I am not dealing only with *things,* but of something closer to the time-honored Powers and Principalities. I wish that it were not so and that an epigon were only an artifact akin to the ball lightning Tesla studied. But there is something behind it, surely as that yellow airplane had its pilot.

The fisherman sees me and waves. It is a peculiar feeling, this sudden commerce with a point of philosophical departure. I wave back with a feeling of pleasure.

I am surprised at the readiness with which I accept this emotion. I feel it has to do with the general state of my health. All of this fresh air and hiking seems to have strengthened me. My senses are sharper, my appetite better. I have lost some weight and gained some muscle. I have not required medication for several days.

I wonder. . . ?

Is this entirely a good thing? True, I must keep up my strength. I must be ready for many things. But too much strength . . . Could that be self-defeating in terms of my overall plan? A balance, perhaps I should seek a balance—

I laugh, for the first time since I do not remember when. It is ridiculous to dwell on life and death, sickness and health this way, like a character of Thomas Mann's, when I am barely a quarter of the way into my journey. I will need all of my strength—and possibly more—along the way. Sooner or later the bill will be presented. If the timing is off I must make my own *suki.* In the meantime, I resolve to enjoy what I have.

When I strike it will be with my final exhalation. I know that. It is a phenomenon familiar to martial artists of many persuasions. I recall the story Eugen Herrigel told, of studying with the *kyudo* master, of drawing the bow and waiting, waiting till something signaled the release of the string. For two years he did this before his *sensei* gave him an arrow. I forget for how long it was after that that he repeated the act

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with the arrow. Then it all began to come together, the timeless moment of rightness would occur and the arrow would have to fly, would have to fly for the target. It was a long while before he realized that this moment would always occur at the end of an exhalation.

In art, so in life. It seems that many important things, from death to orgasm, occur at the moment of emptiness, at the point of the breath's hesitation. Perhaps all of them are but reflections of death. This is a profound realization for one such as myself, for my strength must ultimately be drawn from my weakness. It is the control, the ability to find that special moment that troubles me most. But like walking, talking or bearing a child, I trust that something within me knows where it lies. It is too late now to attempt to build it a bridge to my consciousness. I have made my small plans. I have placed them upon a shelf in the back of my mind. I should leave them and turn to other matters.

In the meantime I drink this moment with a deep draught of salty air, telling myself that the ocean is the ocean, the fisherman is a fisherman and Fuji is only a mountain. Slowly then, I exhale it . . .

7. Mt. Fuji from the Foot

Fire in your guts, winter tracks above like strands of ancient hair. The print is somewhat more baleful than the reality this evening. That awful red tinge does not glow above me against a horde of wild clouds. Still, I am not unmoved. It is difficult, before the ancient powers of the Ring of Fire, not to stand with some trepidation, sliding back through geological eons to times of creation and destruction when new lands were formed. The great outpourings, the bomb-like flash and dazzle, the dance of the lightnings like a crown . . .

I meditate on fire and change.

Last night I slept in the precincts of a small Shingon temple, among shrubs trimmed in the shapes of dragons, pagodas, ships, and umbrellas. There were a number of pilgrims of the more conventional sort present at the temple, and the priest performed a fire service—a *goma*—for us. The fires of Fuji remind me, as it reminded me of Fuji.

The priest, a young man, sat at the altar which held the fire basin. He intoned the prayer and built the fire and I watched, completely fascinated by the ritual, as he began to feed the fire with the hundred and eight sticks of wood. These, I have been told, represent the hundred and eight illusions of the soul. While I am not familiar with the full list, I felt it possible that I could come up with a couple of new ones. No matter. He chanted, ringing bells, striking gongs and drums. I glanced at the other *henros*. I saw total absorption upon all of their faces. All but one.

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Another figure had joined us, entering with total silence, and he stood in the shadows off to my right. He was dressed all in black, and the wing of a wide, upturned collar masked the lower portion of his face. He was staring at me. When our eyes met he looked away, focussing his gaze upon the fire. After several moments I did the same.

The priest added incense, leaves, oils. The fire sizzled and spit, the flames leaped, the shadows danced. I began to tremble. There was something familiar about the man. I could not place him, but I wanted a closer look.

I edged slowly to my right during the next ten minutes, as if angling for better views of the ceremony. Suddenly then, I turned and regarded the man again.

I caught him studying me once more, and again he looked away quickly. But the dance of the flames caught him full in the face with light this time, and the jerking of his head withdrew it from the shelter of his collar.

I was certain, in that instant's viewing, that he was the man who had piloted the small yellow plane past me last week at Tamagawa. Though he wore no gold earring there was a shadow-filled indentation in the lobe of his left ear.

But it went beyond that. Having seen him full-face I was certain that I had seen him somewhere before, years ago. I have an unusually good memory for faces, but for some reason I could not place his within its prior context. He frightened me, though, and I felt there was good reason for it.

The ceremony continued until the final stick of wood was placed in the fire and the priest completed his liturgy as it burned and died down. He turned then, silhouetted by the light, and said that it was time for any who were ailing to rub the healing smoke upon themselves if they wished.

Two of the pilgrims moved forward. Slowly, another joined them. I glanced to my right once more. The man was gone, as silently as he had come. I cast my gaze all about the temple. He was nowhere in sight. I felt a touch upon my left shoulder.

Turning, I beheld the priest who had just struck me lightly with the three-pronged brass ritual instrument which he had used in the ceremony.

"Come," he said, "and take the smoke. You need healing of the left arm and shoulder, the left hip and foot."

"How do you know this?" I asked him.

"It was given to me to see this tonight. Come."

He indicated a place to the left of the altar and I moved to it, startled at his insight, for the places he had named had been growing progres-

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sively more numb throughout the day. I had refrained from taking my medicine, hoping that the attack would remit of its own accord.

He massaged me, rubbing the smoke from the dying fire into the places he had named, then instructing me to continue it on my own. I did so, and some on my head at the end, as is traditional.

I searched the grounds later, but my strange observer was nowhere to be found. I located a hiding place between the feet of a dragon and cast my bedroll there. My sleep was not disturbed.

I awoke before dawn to discover that full sensation had returned to all of my previously numbed areas. I was pleased that the attack had remitted without medication.

The rest of the day, as I journeyed here, to the foot of Fuji, I felt surprisingly well. Even now I am filled with unusual strength and energy, and it frightens me. What if the smoke of the fire ceremony has somehow effected a cure? I am afraid of what it could do to my plans, my resolve. I am not sure that I would know how to deal with it.

Thus, Fuji, Lord of the Hidden Fire, I have come, fit and afraid. I will camp near here tonight. In the morning I will move on. Your presence overwhelms me at this range. I will withdraw for a different, more distant perspective. If I were ever to climb you, would I cast one hundred and eight sticks into your holy furnace, I wonder? I think not. There are some illusions I do not wish to destroy.

8. Mt. Fuji from Tagonoura

I came out in a boat to look back upon the beach, the slopes, and Fuji. I am still in glowing remission. I have resigned myself to it, for now. In the meantime, the day is bright, the sea breeze cool. The boat is rocked by the small deaths, as the fisherman and his sons whom I have paid to bring me out steer it at my request to provide me with the view most approximating that of the print. So much of the domestic architecture in this land recommends to my eye the prows of ships. A convergence of cultural evolution where the message is the medium? The sea is life? Drawing sustenance from beneath the waves we are always at sea? Or, the sea is death, it may rise to blight our lands and claim our lives at any moment? Therefore, we bear this *memento mori* even in the roofs above our heads and the walls which sustain them? Or, this is the sign of our power, over life and death?

Or none of the above. It may seem that I harbor a strong death-wish. This is incorrect. My desires are just the opposite. It may indeed be that I am using Hokusai's prints as a kind of Rorschach for self-discovery, but it is death-fascination rather than death-wish that informs my mind.

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I believe that this is understandable in one suffering a terminal condition with a very short term to it.

Enough of that for now. It was meant only as a drawing of my blade to examine its edge for keenness. I find that my weapon is still in order and I resheathe it.

Blue-gray Fuji, salted with snow, long angle of repose to my left . . . I never seem to look upon the same mountain twice. You change as much as I myself yet you remain what you are. Which means that there is hope for me.

I lower my eyes to where we share this quality with the sea, vast living data-net. Like yet unlike, you have fought that sea as I—

Birds. Let me listen and watch them for a time, the air-riders who dip and feed.

I watch the men work with the nets. It is relaxing to behold their nimble movements. After a time, I doze.

Sleeping, I dream, and dreaming I behold the god Kokuzo. It can be no other, for when he draws his blade which flashes like the sun and points it at me he speaks his name. He repeats it over and over as I tremble before him, but something is wrong. I know that he is telling me something other than his identity. I reach for but cannot grasp the meaning. Then he moves the point of his blade, indicating something beyond me. I turn my head. I behold the man in black—the pilot, the watcher at the *goma*. He is studying me, just as he was that night. What does he seek in my face?

I am awakened by a violent rocking of the boat as we strike a rougher sea. I catch hold of the gunwale beside which I sit. A quick survey of my surroundings shows me that we are in no danger, and I turn my eyes to Fuji. Is he laughing at me? Or is it the chuckle of Hokusai, who squats on his hams beside me tracing naughty pictures in the moisture of the boat's bottom with a long, withered finger?

If a mystery cannot be solved it must be saved. Later, then. I will return to the message when my mind has moved into a new position.

Soon, another load of fish is being hauled aboard to add to the pungency of this voyage. Wriggle howsoever they will they do not escape the net. I think of Kendra and wonder how she is holding up. I hope that her anger with me has abated. I trust that she has not escaped her imprisonment. I left her in the care of acquaintances at a primitive, isolated commune in the Southwest. I do not like the place, nor am I overfond of its residents. Yet they owe me several large favors—intentionally bestowed against these times—and they will keep her there until certain things come to pass. I see her delicate features, fawn eyes, and silken hair. A bright, graceful girl, used to some luxuries, fond of long soaks and frequent showers, crisp garments. She is probably mud-spattered or

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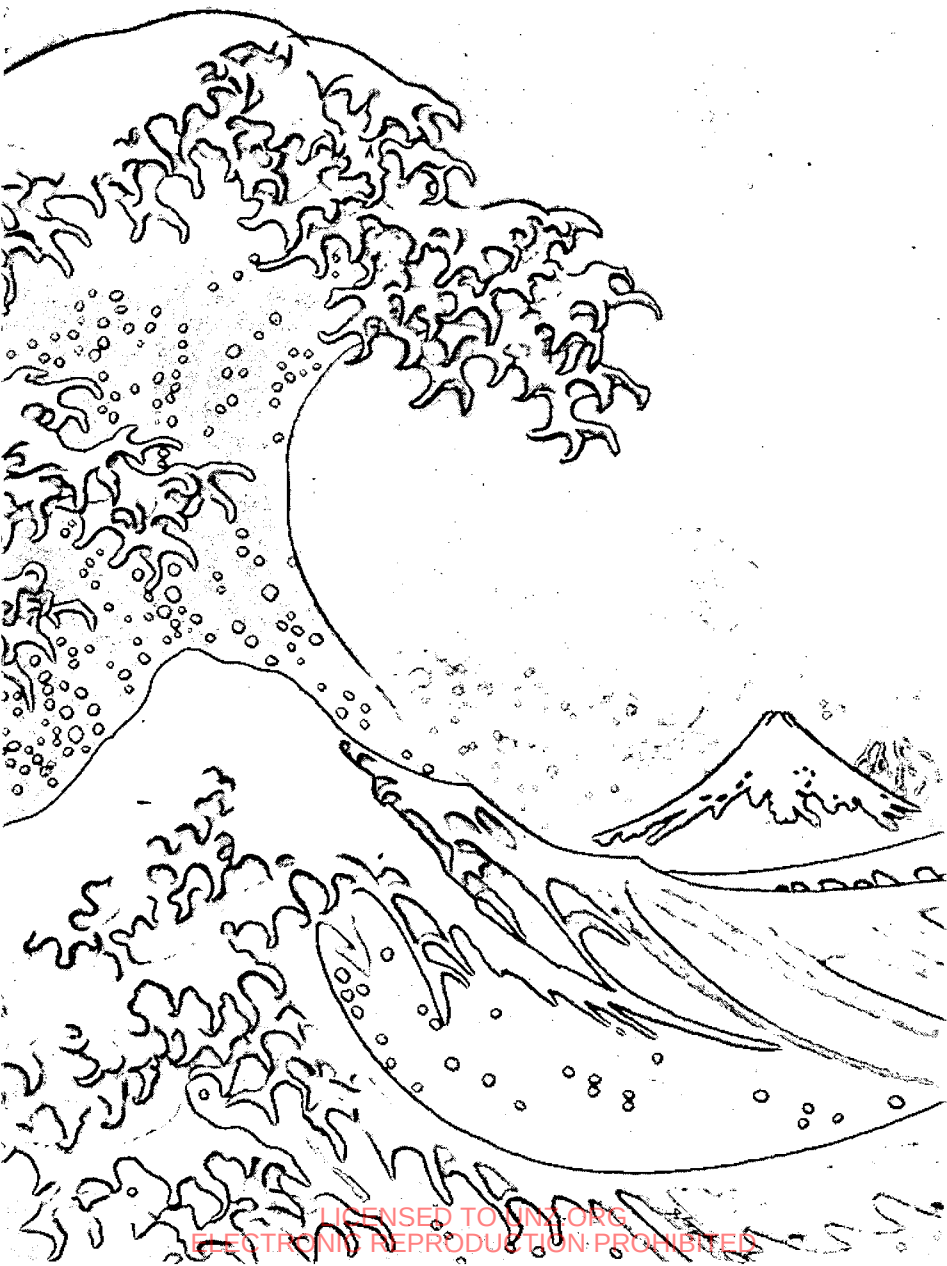

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dusty at the moment, from slopping hogs, weeding, planting vegetables or harvesting them, or any of a number of basic chores. Perhaps it will be good for her character. She ought to get something from the experience other than preservation from a possibly terrible fate.

Time passes. I take my lunch.

Later, I muse upon Fuji, Kokuzo, and my fears. Are dreams but the tranced mind's theater of fears and desires, or do they sometimes truly reflect unconsidered aspects of reality, perhaps to give warning? To reflect . . . It is said that the perfect mind reflects. The *shintai* in its ark in its shrine is the thing truly sacred to the god—a small mirror—not the images. The sea reflects the sky, in fullness of cloud or blueemptiness. Hamlet-like, one can work many interpretations of the odd, but only one should have a clear outline. I hold the dream in my mind once more, absent all querying. Something is moving . . .

No. I almost had it. But I reached too soon. My mirror is shattered.

Staring shoreward, the matter of synchronicity occurs. There is a new grouping of people. I withdraw my small spy-scope and take its measure, already knowing what I will regard.

Again, he wears black. He is speaking with two men upon the beach. One of the men gestures out across the water, toward us. The distance is too great to make out features clearly, but I know that it is the same man. But now it is not fear that I know. A slow anger begins to burn within my *hara*. I would return to shore and confront him. He is only one man. I will deal with him now. I cannot afford any more of the unknown than that for which I have already provided. He must be met properly, dismissed or accounted for.

I call to the captain to take me ashore immediately. He grumbles. The fishing is good, the day still young. I offer him more money. Reluctantly, he agrees. He calls orders to his sons to put the boat about and head in.

I stand in the bow. Let him have a good look. I send my anger on ahead. The sword is as sacred an object as the mirror.

As Fuji grows before me the man glances in our direction, hands something to the others, then turns and ambles away. No! There is no way to hasten our progress, and at this rate he will be gone before I reach land. I curse. I want immediate satisfaction, not extension of mystery.

And the men with whom he was speaking . . . Their hands go to their pockets, they laugh, then walk off in another direction. Drifters. Did he pay them for whatever information they gave him? So it would seem. And are they heading now for some tavern to drink up the price of my peace of mind? I call out after them but the wind whips my words away. They, too, will be gone by the time I arrive.

And this is true. When I finally stand upon the beach the only familiar

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face is that of my mountain, gleaming like a carbuncle in sun's slanting rays.

I dig my nails into my palms but my arms do not become wings.

9. Mt. Fuji from Naborito

I am fond of this print: the torii of a Shinto shrine are visible above the sea at low tide, and people dig clams amid the sunken ruins. Fuji of course is visible through the torii. Were it a Christian church beneath the waves puns involving the Clam of God would be running through my mind. Geography saves, however.

And reality differs entirely. I cannot locate the place. I am in the area and Fuji properly situated, but the torii must be long gone and I have no way of knowing whether there is a sunken temple out there.

I am seated on a hillside looking across the water and I am suddenly not just tired but exhausted. I have come far and fast these past several days, and it seems that my exertions have all caught up with me. I will sit here and watch the sea and the sky. At least my shadow, the man in black, has been nowhere visible since the beach at Tagonoura. A young cat chases a moth at the foot of my hill, leaping into the air, white-gloved paws flashing. The moth gains altitude, escapes in a gust of wind. The cat sits for several moments, big eyes staring after it.

I make my way to a declivity I had spotted earlier, where I might be free of the wind. There I lay my pack and cast my bedroll, my poncho beneath it. After removing my shoes I get inside quickly. I seem to have taken a bit of a chill and my limbs are very heavy. I would have been willing to pay to sleep indoors tonight but I am too tired to seek shelter.

I lie here and watch the lights come on in the darkening sky. As usual in cases of extreme fatigue sleep does not come to me easily. Is this legitimate tiredness or a symptom of something else? I do not wish to take medication merely as a precaution, though, so I try thinking of nothing for a time. This does not work. I am overcome with the desire for a cup of hot tea. In its absence I swallow a jigger of brandy which warms my insides for a time.

Still, sleep eludes me and I decide to tell myself a story as I did when I was very young and wanted to make the world turn into dream.

So . . . Upon a time during the troubles following the death of the Retired Emperor Sutoku a number of itinerant monks of various persuasions came this way, having met upon the road, traveling to seek respite from the wars, earthquakes and whirlwinds which so disturbed the land. They hoped to found a religious community and pursue the meditative life in quiet and tranquility. They came upon what appeared

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to be a deserted Shinto shrine near the seaside, and there they camped for the night, wondering what plague or misfortune might have carried off its attendants. The place was in good repair and no evidence of violence was to be seen. They discussed then the possibility of making this their retreat, of themselves becoming the shrine's attendants. They grew enthusiastic with the idea and spent much of the night talking over these plans. In the morning, however, an ancient priest appeared from within the shrine, as if to commence a day's duties. The monks asked him the story of the place, and he informed them that once there had been others to assist him in his duties but that they had long ago been taken by the sea during a storm, while about their peculiar devotions one night upon the shore. And no, it was not really a Shinto shrine, though in outward appearance it seemed such. It was actually the temple of a far older religion of which he could well be the last devotee. They were welcome, however, to join him here and learn of it if they so wished. The monks discussed it quickly among themselves and decided that since it was a pleasant-seeming place, it might be well to stay and hear whatever teaching the old man possessed. So they became residents at the strange shrine. The place troubled several of them considerably at first, for at night they seemed to hear the calling of musical voices in the waves and upon the sea wind. And on occasion it seemed as if they could hear the old priest's voice responding to these calls. One night one of them followed the sounds and saw the old man standing upon the beach, his arms upraised. The monk hid himself and later fell asleep in a crevice in the rocks. When he awoke a full moon stood high in the heavens and the old man was gone. The monk went down to the place where he had stood and there saw many marks in the sand, all of them the prints of webbed feet. Shaken, the monk returned and recited his experience to his fellows. They spent weeks thereafter trying to catch a glimpse of the old man's feet, which were always wrapped and bound. They did not succeed, but after a time it seemed to matter less and less. His teachings influenced them slowly but steadily. They began to assist him in his rituals to the Old Ones, and they learned the name of this promontory and its shrine. It was the last above-sea remnant of a large sunken island, which he assured them rose on certain wondrous occasions to reveal a lost city inhabited by the servants of his masters. The name of the place was R'lyeh and they would be happy to go there one day. By then it seemed a good idea, for they had noticed a certain thickening and extension of the skin between their fingers and toes, the digits themselves becoming sturdier and more elongated. By then, too, they were participating in all of the rites, which grew progressively abominable. At length, after a particularly gory ritual, the old priest's promise was fulfilled in reverse. Instead of the island rising, the promontory sank to join it, bearing the

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shrine and all of the monks along with it. So their abominations are primarily aquatic now. But once every century or so the whole island does indeed rise up for a night, and troops of them make their way ashore seeking victims. And of course, tonight is the night. . . .

A delicious feeling of drowsiness has finally come over me with this telling, based upon some of my favorite bedtime stories. My eyes are closed. I float on a cotton-filled raft . . . I—

A sound! Above me! Toward the sea. Something moving my way. Slowly, then quickly.

Adrenalin sends a circuit of fire through my limbs. I extend my hand carefully, quietly, and take hold of my staff.

Waiting. Why now, when I am weakened? Must danger always approach at the worst moment?

There is a thump as it strikes the ground beside me, and I let out the breath I have been holding.

It is the cat, little more than a kitten, which I had observed earlier. Purring, it approaches. I reach out and stroke it. It rubs against me. After a time I take it into the bag. It curls up at my side, still purring, warm. It is good to have something that trusts you and wants to be near you. I call the cat R'lyeh. Just for one night.

10. Mt. Fuji from Ejiri

I took the bus back this way. I was too tired to hike. I have taken my medicine as I probably should have been doing all along. Still, it could be several days before it brings me some relief, and this frightens me. I cannot really afford such a condition. I am not certain what I will do, save that I must go on.

The print is deceptive, for a part of its force lies in the effects of a heavy wind. Its skies are gray, Fuji is dim in the background, the people on the road and the two trees beside it all suffer from the wind's buffeting. The trees bend, the people clutch at their garments, there is a hat high in the air and some poor scribe or author has had his manuscript snatched skyward to flee from him across the land (reminding me of an old cartoon—Editor to Author: "A funny thing happened to your manuscript during the St. Patrick's Day Parade"). The scene which confronts me is less active at a meteorological level. The sky is indeed overcast but there is no wind, Fuji is darker, more clearly delineated than in the print, there are no struggling pedestrians in sight. There are many more trees near at hand. I stand near a small grove, in fact. There are some structures in the distance which are not present in the picture.

I lean heavily upon my staff. Live a little, die a little. I have reached

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my tenth station and I still do not know whether Fuji is giving me strength or taking it from me. Both, perhaps.

I head off into the wood, my face touched by a few raindrops as I go. There are no signs posted and no one seems to be about. I work my way back from the road, coming at last to a small clear area containing a few rocks and boulders. It will do as a campsite. I want nothing more than to spend the day resting.

I soon have a small fire going, my tiny teapot poised on rocks above it. A distant roll of thunder adds variety to my discomfort, but so far the rain has held off. The ground is damp, however. I spread my poncho and sit upon it while I wait. I hone a knife and put it away. I eat some biscuits and study a map. I suppose I should feel some satisfaction, in that things are proceeding somewhat as I intended. I wish that I could, but I do not.

An unspecified insect which has been making buzzing noises somewhere behind me ceases its buzzing. I hear a twig snap a moment later. My hand snakes out to fall upon my staff.

"Don't," says a voice at my back.

I turn my head. He is standing eight or ten feet from me, the man in black, earring in place, his right hand in his jacket pocket. And it looks as if there is more than his hand in there, pointed at me.

I remove my hand from my staff and he advances. With the side of his foot he sends the staff partway across the clearing, out of my reach. Then he removes his hand from his pocket, leaving behind whatever it held. He circles slowly to the other side of the fire, staring at me the while.

He seats himself upon a boulder, lets his hands rest upon his knees.

"Mari?" he asks then.

I do not respond to my name, but stare back. The light of Kokuzo's dream-sword flashes in my mind, pointing at him, and I hear the god speaking his name only not quite.

"Kotuzov!" I say then.

The man in black smiles, showing that the teeth I had broken once long ago are now neatly capped.

"I was not so certain of you at first either," he says.

Plastic surgery has removed at least a decade from his face, along with a lot of weathering and several scars. He is different about the eyes and cheeks, also. And his nose is smaller. It is a considerable improvement over the last time we met.

"Your water is boiling," he says then. "Are you going to offer me a cup of tea?"

"Of course," I reply, reaching for my pack where I keep an extra cup.

"Slowly."

"Certainly."

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I locate the cup, I rinse them both lightly with hot water, I prepare the tea.

"No, don't pass it to me," he says, and he reaches forward and takes the cup from where I had filled it.

I suppress a desire to smile.

"Would you have a lump of sugar?" he asks.

"Sorry."

He sighs and reaches into his other pocket from which he withdraws a small flask.

"Vodka? In tea?"

"Don't be silly. My tastes have changed. It's Wild Turkey Liqueur, a wonderful sweetener. Would you care for some?"

"Let me smell it."

There is a certain sweetness to the aroma.

"All right," I say, and he laces our tea with it.

We taste the tea. Not bad.

"How long has it been?" he asks.

"Fourteen years—almost fifteen," I tell him. "Back in the eighties."

"Yes."

He rubs his jaw. "I'd heard you'd retired."

"You heard right. It was about a year after our last—encounter."

"Turkey—yes. You married a man from your Code Section."

I nod.

"You were widowed three or four years later. Daughter born after your husband's death. Returned to the States. Settled in the country. That's all I know."

"That's all there is."

He takes another drink of tea.

"Why did you come back here?"

"Personal reasons. Partly sentimental."

"Under a false identity?"

"Yes. It involves my husband's family. I don't want them to know I'm here."

"Interesting. You mean that they would watch arrivals as closely as we have?"

"I didn't know you watched arrivals here."

"Right now we do."

"You've lost me. I don't know what's going on."

There is another roll of thunder. A few more drops spatter about us.

"I would like to believe that you are really retired," he says. "I'm getting near that point myself, you know."

"I have no reason to be back in business. I inherited a decent amount, enough to take care of me and my daughter."

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He nods.

"If I had such an inducement I would not be in the field," he says. "I would rather sit home and read, play chess, eat and drink regularly. But you must admit it is quite a coincidence your being here when the future success of several nations is being decided."

I shake my head.

"I've been out of touch with a lot of things."

"The Osaka Oil Conference. It begins two weeks from Wednesday. You were planning perhaps to visit Osaka at about that time?"

"I will not be going to Osaka."

"A courier then. Someone from there will meet you, a simple tourist, at some point in your travels, to convey—"

"My God! Do you think everything's a conspiracy, Boris? I am just taking care of some personal problems and visiting some places that mean something to me. The conference doesn't."

"All right." He finishes his tea and puts the cup aside. "You know that we know you are here. A word to the Japanese authorities that you are traveling under false papers and they will kick you out. That would be simplest. No real harm done and one agent nullified. Only it would be a shame to spoil your trip if you are indeed only a tourist. . . ."

A rotten thought passes through my mind as I see where this is leading, and I know that my thought is far rottener than his. It is something I learned from a strange old woman I once worked with who did not look like an old woman.

I finish my tea and raise my eyes. He is smiling.

"I will make us some more tea," I say.

I see that the top button of my shirt comes undone while I am bent partly away from him. Then I lean forward with his cup and take a deep breath.

"You would consider not reporting me to the authorities?"

"I might," he says. "I think your story is probably true. And even if it is not, you would not take the risk of transporting anything now that I know about you."

"I really want to finish this trip," I say, blinking a few extra times. "I would do anything not to be sent back now."

He takes hold of my hand.

"I am glad you said that, Maryushka," he replies. "I am lonely, and you are still a fine-looking woman."

"You think so?"

"I always thought so, even that day you bashed in my teeth."

"Sorry about that. It was strictly business, you know."

His hand moves to my shoulder.

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"Of course. They looked better when they were fixed than they had before, anyway."

He moves over and sits beside me.

"I have dreamed of doing this many times," he tells me, as he unfastens the rest of the buttons on my shirt and unbuckles my belt.

He rubs my belly softly. It is not an unpleasant feeling. It has been a long time.

Soon we are fully undressed. He takes his time, and when he is ready I welcome him between my legs. All right, Boris. I give the ride you take the fall. I could almost feel a little guilty about it. You are gentler than I'd thought you would be. I commence the proper breathing pattern, deep and slow. I focus my attention on my *hara* and his, only inches away. I feel our energies, dreamlike and warm, moving. Soon, I direct their flow. He feels it only as pleasure, perhaps more draining than usual. When he has done, though . . .

"You said you had some problem?" he inquires in that masculine coital magnanimity generally forgotten a few minutes afterwards. "If it is something I could help you with, I have a few days off, here and there. I like you, Maryushka."

"It's something I have to do myself. Thanks anyway."

I continue the process.

Later, as I dress myself, he lies there looking up at me.

"I must be getting old, Maryushka," he reflects. "You have tired me. I feel I could sleep for a week."

"That sounds about right," I say. "A week and you should be feeling fine again."

"I do not understand . . ."

"You've been working too hard, I'm sure. That conference . . ."

He nods.

"You are probably right. You are not really involved. . . ?"

"I am really not involved."

"Good."

I clean the pot and my cups. I restore them to my pack.

"Would you be so kind as to move, Boris dear? I'll be needing the poncho very soon, I think."

"Of course."

He rises slowly and passes it to me. He begins dressing. His breathing is heavy.

"Where are you going from here?"

"Mishima-goe," I say, "for another view of my mountain."

He shakes his head. He finishes dressing and seats himself on the ground, his back against a treetrunk. He finds his flask and takes a swallow. He extends it then.

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"Would you care for some?"

"Thank you, no. I must be on my way."

I retrieve my staff. When I look at him again he smiles faintly, ruefully.

"You take a lot out of a man, Maryushka."

"I had to," I say.

I move off. I will hike twenty miles today, I am certain. The rain begins to descend before I am out of the grove; leaves rustle like the wings of bats.

11. Mt. Fuji from Mishima-goe

Sunlight. Clean air. The print shows a big cryptameria tree, Fuji looming behind it, crowned with smoke. There is no smoke today, but I have located a big cryptameria and positioned myself so that it cuts Fuji's shoulder to the left of the cone. There are a few clouds, not so popcorny as Hokusai's smoke (he shrugs at this), and they will have to do.

My stolen *ki* still sustains me, though the medication is working now beneath it. Like a transplanted organ, my body will soon reject the borrowed energy. By then, though, the drugs should be covering for me.

In the meantime, the scene and the print are close to each other. It is a lovely spring day. Birds are singing, butterflies stitch the air in zigzag patterns; I can almost hear the growth of plants beneath the soil. The world smells fresh and new. I am no longer being followed. Hello to life again.

I regard the huge old tree and listen for its echoes down the ages: Yggdrasil, the Golden Bough, the Yule tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Bo beneath which Lord Gautama found his soul and lost it. . . .

I move forward to run my hand along its rough bark.

From that position I am suddenly given a new view of the valley below. The fields look like raked sand, the hills like rocks, Fuji a boulder. It is a garden, perfectly laid out. . . .

Later I notice that the sun has moved. I have been standing here for hours. My small illumination beneath a great tree. Older than my humanity, I do not know what I can do for it in return.

Stooping suddenly, I pick up one of its cones. A tiny thing, for such a giant. It is barely the size of my little fingernail. Delicately incised, as if sculpted by fairies.

I put it in my pocket. I will plant it somewhere along my way.

I retreat then, for I hear the sound of approaching bells and I am not yet ready for humanity to break my mood. But there was a small inn

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down the road which does not look to be part of a chain. I will bathe and eat there and sleep in a bed tonight.

I will still be strong tomorrow.

12. Mt. Fuji from Lake Kawaguchi

Reflections.

This is one of my favorite prints in the series: Fuji as seen from across the lake and reflected within it. There are green hills at either hand, a small village upon the far shore, a single small boat in sight upon the water. The most fascinating feature of the print is that the reflection of Fuji is not the same as the original; its position is wrong, its slope is wrong, it is snow-capped and the surface view of Fuji itself is not.

I sit in the small boat I have rented, looking back. The sky is slightly hazy, which is good. No glare to spoil the reflection. The town is no longer as quaint as in the print, and it has grown. But I am not concerned with details of this sort. Fuji is reflected more perfectly in my viewing, but the doubling is still a fascinating phenomenon for me.

Interesting, too . . . In the print the village is not reflected, nor is there an image of the boat in the water. The only reflection is Fuji's. There is no sign of humanity.

I see the reflected buildings near the water's edge. And my mind is stirred by other images than those Hokusai would have known. Of course drowned R'lyeh occurs to me, but the place and the day are too idyllic. It fades from mind almost immediately, to be replaced by sunken Ys whose bells still toll the hours beneath the sea. And Selma Lagerloff's *Nils Holgersson*, the tale of the shipwrecked sailor who finds himself in a sunken city at the bottom of the sea—a place drowned to punish its greedy, arrogant inhabitants, who still go about their business of cheating each other, though they are all of them dead. They wear rich, old-fashioned clothes and conduct their business as they once did above in this strange land beneath the waves. The sailor is drawn to them, but he knows that he must not be discovered or he will be turned into one of them, never to return to the earth, to see the sun. I suppose I think of this old children's story because I understand now how the sailor must have felt. My discovery, too, could result in a transformation I do not desire.

And of course, as I lean forward and view my own features mirrored in the water there is the world of Lewis Carroll beneath its looking-glass surface. To be an Ama diving girl and descend . . . To spin downward, and for a few minutes to know the inhabitants of a land of paradox and great charm . . .

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Mirror, mirror, why does the real world so seldom cooperate with our esthetic enthusiasms?

Halfway finished. I reach the midpoint of my pilgrimage to confront myself in a lake. It is a good time and place to look upon my own countenance, to reflect upon all of the things which have brought me here, to consider what the rest of the journey may hold. Though images may sometimes lie. The woman who looks back at me seems composed, strong, and better-looking than I had thought she would. I like you, Kawaguchi, lake with a human personality. I flatter you with literary compliments and you return the favor.

Meeting Boris lifted a burden of fear from my mind. No human agents of my nemesis have risen to trouble my passage. So the odds have not yet tipped so enormously against me as they might.

Fuji and image. Mountain and soul. Would an evil thing cast no reflection down here—some dark mountain where terrible deeds were performed throughout history? I am reminded that Kit no longer casts a shadow, has no reflection.

Is he truly evil, though? By my lights he is. Especially if he is doing the things I think he is doing.

He said that he loved me, and I did love him, once. What will he say to me when we meet again, as meet we must?

It will not matter. Say what he will, I am going to try to kill him. He believes that he is invincible, indestructible. I do not, though I do believe that I am the only person on earth capable of destroying him. It took a long time for me to figure the means, an even longer time before the decision to try it was made for me. I must do it for Kendra as well as for myself. The rest of the world's population comes third.

I let my fingers trail in the water. Softly, I begin to sing an old song, a love song. I am loath to leave this place. Will the second half of my journey be a mirror-image of the first? Or will I move beyond the looking-glass, to pass into that strange realm where he makes his home?

I planted the cryptameria's seed in a lonesome valley yesterday afternoon. Such a tree will look elegant there one day, outliving nations and armies, madmen and sages.

I wonder where R'lyeh is? She ran off in the morning after breakfast, perhaps to pursue a butterfly. Not that I could have brought her with me.

I hope that Kendra is well. I have written her a long letter explaining many things. I left it in the care of an attorney friend who will be sending it to her one day in the not too distant future.

The prints of Hokusai . . . They could outlast the cryptameria. I will not be remembered for any works.

Drifting between the worlds I formulate our encounter for the thou-

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sandth time. He will have to be able to duplicate an old trick to get what he wants. I will have to perform an even older one to see that he doesn't get it. We are both out of practice.

It has been long since I read *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. It is not the sort of thing I've sought to divert me in recent years. But I recall a line or two as I see fish dart by: "Polycrates Samius, that flung his ring into the sea, because he would participate in the discontent of others, and had it miraculously restored to him again shortly after, by a fish taken as he angled, was not free from melancholy dispositions. No man can cure himself . . ." Kit threw away his life and gained it. I kept mine and lost it. Are rings ever really returned to the proper people? And what about a woman curing herself? The cure I seek is a very special one.

Hokusai, you have shown me many things. Can you show me an answer?

Slowly, the old man raises his arm and points to his mountain. Then he lowers it and points to the mountain's image.

I shake my head. It is an answer that is no answer. He shakes his head back at me and points again.

The clouds are massing high above Fuji, but that is no answer. I study them for a long while but can trace no interesting images within.

Then I drop my eyes. Below me, inverted, they take a different form. It is as if they depict the clash of two armed hosts. I watch in fascination as they flow together, the forces from my right gradually rolling over and submerging those to my left. Yet in so doing, those from my right are diminished.

Conflict? That is the message? And both sides lose things they do not wish to lose? Tell me something I do not already know, old man.

He continues to stare. I follow his gaze again, upward. Now I see a dragon, diving into Fuji's cone.

I look below once again. No armies remain, only carnage; and here the dragon's tail becomes a dying warrior's arm holding a sword.

I close my eyes and reach for it. A sword of smoke for a man of fire.

13. Mt. Fuji from Koishikawa in Edo

Snow, on the roofs of houses, on evergreens, on Fuji—just beginning to melt in places, it seems. A windowful of women—geishas, I would say—looking out at it, one of them pointing at three dark birds high in the pale sky. My closest view of Fuji to that in the print is unfortunately snowless, geishaless, and sunny.

Details . . .

Both are interesting, and superimposition is one of the major forces

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of esthetics. I cannot help but think of the hot-spring geisha Komako in *Snow Country*—Yasunari Kawabata's novel of loneliness and wasted, fading beauty—which I have always felt to be the great anti-love story of Japan. This print brings the entire tale to mind for me. The denial of love. Kit was no Shimamura, for he did want me, but only on his own highly specialized terms, terms that must remain unacceptable to me. Selfishness or selflessness? It is not important . . .

And the birds at which the geisha points. . . ? "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird?" To the point. We could never agree on values.

The Twa Corbies? And throw in Ted Hughes' pugnacious Crow? Perhaps so, but I won't draw straws. —An illusion for every allusion, and where's yesterday's snow?

I lean upon my staff and study my mountain. I wish to make it to as many of my stations as possible before ordering the confrontation. Is that not fair? Twenty-four ways of looking at Mt. Fuji. It struck me that it would be good to take one thing in life and regard it from many viewpoints, as a focus for my being, and perhaps as a penance for alternatives missed.

Kit, I am coming, as you once asked of me, but by my own route and for my own reasons. I wish that I did not have to, but you have deprived me of a real choice in this matter. Therefore, my action is not truly my own, but yours. I am become then your own hand turned against you, representative of a kind of cosmic aikido.

I make my way through town after dark, choosing only dark streets where the businesses are shut down. That way I am safe. When I must enter town I always find a protected spot for the day and do my traveling on these streets at night.

I find a small restaurant on the corner of such a one and I take my dinner there. It is a noisy place but the food is good. I also take my medicine, and a little saké.

Afterwards, I indulge in the luxury of walking rather than take a taxi. I've a long way to go, but the night is clear and star-filled and the air is pleasant.

I walk for the better part of ten minutes, listening to the sounds of traffic, music from some distant radio or tape deck, a cry from another street, the wind passing high above me and rubbing its rough fur upon the sides of buildings.

Then I feel a sudden ionization in the air.

Nothing ahead. I turn, spinning my staff into a guard position.

An epigon with a six-legged canine body and a head like a giant fiery flower emerges from a doorway and sidles along the building's front in my direction.

I follow its progress with my staff, feinting as soon as it is near enough.

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I strike, unfortunately with the wrong tip, as it comes on. My hair begins to rise as I spin out of its way, cutting, retreating, turning, then striking again. This time the metal tip passes into that floral head.

I had turned on the batteries before I commenced my attack. The charge creates an imbalance. The epigon retreats, head ballooning. I follow and strike again, this time mid-body. It swells even larger, then collapses in a shower of sparks. But I am already turning away and striking again, for I had become aware of the approach of another even as I was dealing with the first.

This one advances in kangaroo-like bounds. I brush it by with my staff, but its long bulbous tail strikes me as it passes. I recoil involuntarily from the shock I receive, my reflexes spinning the staff before me as I retreat. It turns quickly and rears then. This one is a quadruped, and its raised forelimbs are fountains of fire. Its faceful of eyes blazes and hurts to look upon.

It drops back onto its haunches then springs again.

I roll beneath it and attack as it descends. But I miss, and it turns to attack again even as I continue thrusting. It springs and I turn aside, striking upward. It seems that I connect, but I cannot be certain.

It lands quite near me, raising its forelimbs. But this time it does not spring. It simply falls forward, hind feet making a rapid shuffling movement the while, the legs seeming to adjust their lengths to accommodate a more perfect flow.

As it comes on I catch it square in the midsection with the proper end of my staff. It keeps coming, or falling, even as it flares and begins to disintegrate. Its touch stiffens me for a moment, and I feel the flow of its charge down my shoulder and across my breast. I watch it come apart in a final photoflash instant and be gone.

I turn quickly again but there is no third emerging from the doorway. None overhead either. There is a car coming up the street, slowing, however. No matter. The terminal's potential must be exhausted for the moment, though I am puzzled by the consideration of how long it must have been building to produce the two I just dispatched. It is best that I be away quickly now.

As I resume my progress, though, a voice calls to me from the car which has now drawn up beside me:

"Madam, a moment please."

It is a police car, and the young man who has addressed me wears a uniform and a very strange expression.

"Yes, officer?" I reply.

"I saw you just a few moments ago," he says. "What were you doing?"

I laugh.

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"It is such a fine evening," I say then, "and the street was deserted. I thought I would do a *kata* with my *bo*."

"I thought at first that something was attacking you, that I saw something . . ."

"I am alone," I say, "as you can see."

He opens the door and climbs out. He flicks on a flashlight and shines its beam across the sidewalk, into the doorway.

"Were you setting off fireworks?"

"No."

"There were some sparkles and flashes."

"You must be mistaken."

He sniffs the air. He inspects the sidewalk very closely, then the gutter.

"Strange," he says. "Have you far to go?"

"Not too far."

"Have a good evening."

He gets back into the car. Moments later it is headed up the street.

I continue quickly on my way. I wish to be out of the vicinity before another charge can be built. I also wish to be out of the vicinity simply because being here makes me uneasy.

I am puzzled at the ease with which I was located. What did I do wrong?

"My prints," Hokusai seems to say, after I have reached my destination and drunk too much brandy. "Think, daughter, or they will trap you."

I try, but Fuji is crushing my head, squeezing off thoughts. Epigons dance on his slopes. I pass into a fitful slumber.

In tomorrow's light perhaps I shall see . . .

14. Mt. Fuji from Meguro in Edo

Again, the print is not the reality for me. It shows peasants amid a rustic village, terraced hillsides, a lone tree jutting from the slope of the hill to the right, a snowcapped Fuji partly eclipsed by the base of the rise.

I could not locate anything approximating it, though I do have a partly blocked view of Fuji—blocked in a similar manner, by a slope—from this bench I occupy in a small park. It will do.

Partly blocked, like my thinking. There is something I should be seeing but it is hidden from me. I felt it the moment the epigons appeared, like the devils sent to claim Faust's soul. But I never made a pact with the Devil . . . just Kit, and it was called marriage. I had no way of knowing how similar it would be.

Now . . . What puzzles me most is how my location was determined despite my precautions. My head-on encounter must be on my terms, not

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anyone else's. The reason for this transcends the personal, though I will not deny the involvement of the latter.

In *Hagakure,* Yamamoto Tsunetomo advised that the Way of the Samurai is the Way of Death, that one must live as though one's body were already dead in order to gain full freedom. For me, this attitude is not so difficult to maintain. The freedom part is more complicated, however; when one no longer understands the full nature of the enemy, one's actions are at least partly conditioned by uncertainty.

My occulted Fuji is still there in his entirety, I know, despite my lack of full visual data. By the same token I ought to be able to extend the lines I have seen thus far with respect to the power which now devils me. Let us return to death. There seems to be something there, though it also seems that there is only so much you can say about it and I already have.

Death . . . Come gentle . . . We used to play a parlor game, filling in bizarre causes on imaginary death certificates: "Eaten by the Loch Ness monster." "Stepped on by Godzilla." "Poisoned by a ninja." "Translated."

Kit had stared at me, brow knitting, when I'd offered that last one.

"What do you mean 'translated'?" he asked.

"Okay, you can get me on a technicality," I said, "but I still think the effect would be the same. 'Enoch was translated that he should not see death'—Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, 11:5."

"I don't understand."

"It means to convey directly to heaven without messing around with the customary termination here on earth. Some Moslems believe that the Mahdi was translated."

"An interesting concept," he said. "I'll have to think about it."

Obviously, he did.

I've always thought that Kurosawa could have done a hell of a job with *Don Quixote.* Say there is this old gentleman living in modern times, a scholar, a man who is fascinated by the early days of the samurai and the Code of Bushido. Say that he identifies so strongly with these ideals that one day he loses his senses and comes to believe that he *is* an old-time samurai. He dons some ill-fitting armor he had collected, takes up his *katana,* goes forth to change the world. Ultimately, he is destroyed by it, but he holds to the Code. That quality of dedication sets him apart and ennobles him, for all of his ludicrousness. I have never felt that *Don Quixote* was merely a parody of chivalry, especially not after I'd learned that Cervantes had served under Don John of Austria at the battle of Lepanto. For it might be argued that Don John was the last European to be guided by the medieval code of chivalry. Brought up on medieval romances, he had conducted his life along these lines. What did it matter if the medieval knights themselves had not? He believed and he acted

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on his belief. In anyone else it might simply have been amusing, save that time and circumstance granted him the opportunity to act on several large occasions, and he won. Cervantes could not but have been impressed by his old commander, and who knows how this might have influenced his later literary endeavor? Ortega y Gasset referred to Quixote as a Gothic Christ. Dostoevsky felt the same way about him, and in his attempt to portray a Christ-figure in Prince Myshkin he, too, felt that madness was a necessary precondition for this state in modern times.

All of which is preamble to stating my belief that Kit was at least partly mad. But he was no Gothic Christ. An Electronic Buddha would be much closer.

"Does the data-net have the Buddha-nature?" he asked me one day.

"Sure," I said. "Doesn't everything?" Then I saw the look in his eyes and added, "How the hell should I know?"

He grunted then and reclined his resonance couch, lowered the induction helmet and continued his computer-augmented analysis of a Lucifer cipher with a 128-bit key. Theoretically, it would take thousands of years to crack it by brute force, but the answer was needed within two weeks. His nervous system coupled with the data-net, he was able to deliver.

I did not notice his breathing patterns for some time. It was not until later that I came to realize that after he had finished his work he would meditate for increasingly long periods of time while still joined with the system.

When I realized this I chided him for being too lazy to turn the thing off.

He smiled.

"The flow," he said. "You do not fixate at one point. You go with the flow."

"You could throw the switch before you go with the flow and cut down on our electric bill."

He shook his head, still smiling.

"But it is that particular flow that I am going with. I am getting farther and farther into it. You should try it sometime. There have been moments when I felt I could translate myself into it."

"Linguistically or theologically?"

"Both," he replied.

And one night he did indeed go with the flow. I found him in the morning—sleeping, I thought—in his resonance couch, the helmet still in place. This time, at least, he had shut down our terminal. I let him rest. I had no idea how late he might have been working. By evening, though, I was beginning to grow concerned and I tried to rouse him. I could not. He was in a coma.

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Later, in the hospital, he showed a flat EEG. His breathing had grown extremely shallow, his blood pressure was very low, his pulse feeble. He continued to decline during the next two days. The doctors gave him every test they could think of but could determine no cause for his condition. In that he had once signed a document requesting that no heroic measures be taken to prolong his existence should something irreversible take him, he was not hooked up to respirators and pumps and IVs after his heart had stopped beating for the fourth time. The autopsy was unsatisfactory. The death certificate merely showed: "Heart stoppage. Possible cerebrovascular accident." The latter was pure speculation. They had found so sign of it. His organs were not distributed to the needy as he had once requested, for fear of some strange new virus which might be transmitted.

Kit, like Marley, was dead to begin with.

15. Mt. Fuji from Tsukudajima in Edo

Blue sky, a few low clouds, Fuji across the bay's bright water, a few boats and an islet between us. Again, dismissing time's changes, I find considerable congruence with reality. Again, I sit within a small boat. Here, however, I've no desire to dive beneath the waves in search of sunken splendor or to sample the bacteria-count with my person.

My passage to this place was direct and without incident. Preoccupied I came. Preoccupied I remain. My vitality remains high. My health is no worse. My concerns also remain the same, which means that my major question is still unanswered.

At least I feel safe out here on the water. "Safe", though, is a relative term. "Safer" then, than I felt ashore and passing among possible places of ambush. I have not really felt safe since that day after my return from the hospital. . . .

I was tired when I got back home, following several sleepless nights. I went directly to bed. I did not even bother to note the hour, so I have no idea how long I slept.

I was awakened in the dark by what seemed to be the ringing of the telephone. Sleepily, I reached for the instrument, then realized that it was not actually ringing. Had I been dreaming? I sat up in bed. I rubbed my eyes. I stretched. Slowly, the recent past filled my mind and I knew that I would not sleep again for a time. A cup of tea, I decided, might serve me well now. I rose, to go to the kitchen and heat some water.

As I passed through the work area I saw that one of the CRTs for our terminal was lit. I could not recall its having been on but I moved to turn it off.

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I saw then that its switch was not turned on. Puzzled, I looked again at the screen and for the first time realized that there was a display present:

MARI
ALL IS WELL.
I AM TRANSLATED.
USE THE COUCH AND THE HELMET.
KIT

I felt my fingers digging into my cheeks and my chest was tight from breath retained. Who had done this? How? Was it perhaps some final delirious message left by Kit himself before he went under?

I reached out and flipped the ON-OFF switch back and forth several times, leaving it finally in the OFF position.

The display faded but the light remained on. Shortly, a new display was flashed upon the screen:

YOU READ ME. GOOD.
IT IS ALL RIGHT. I LIVE.
I HAVE ENTERED THE DATA-NET.
SIT ON THE COUCH AND USE THE HELMET.
I WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING.

I ran from the room. In the bathroom I threw up, several times. Then I sat upon the toilet, shaking. Who would play such a horrible joke upon me? I drank several glasses of water and waited for my trembling to subside.

When it had, I went directly to the kitchen, made the tea and drank some. My thoughts settled slowly into the channels of analysis. I considered possibilities. The one that seemed more likely than most was that Kit had left a message for me and that my use of the induction interface gear would trigger its delivery. I wanted that message, whatever it might be, but I did not know whether I possessed sufficient emotional fortitude to receive it at the moment.

I must have sat there for the better part of an hour. I looked out the window once and saw that the sky was growing light. I put down my cup. I returned to the work area.

The screen was still lit. The message, though, had changed:

DO NOT BE AFRAID.
SIT ON THE COUCH AND USE THE HELMET.
THEN YOU WILL UNDERSTAND.

I crossed to the couch. I sat on it and reclined it. I lowered the helmet. At first there was nothing but field noise.

Then I felt his presence, a thing difficult to describe in a world customarily filled only with data flows. I waited. I tried to be receptive to whatever he had somehow left imprinted for me.

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"I am not a recording, Mari," he seemed to say to me then. "I am really here."

I resisted the impulse to flee. I had worked hard for this composure and I meant to maintain it.

"I made it over," he seemed to say. "I have entered the net. I am spread out through many places. It is pure kundalini. I am nothing but flow. It is wonderful. I will be forever here. It is nirvana."

"It really is you," I said.

"Yes. I have translated myself. I want to show you what it means."

"Very well."

"I am gathered here now. Open the legs of your mind and let me in fully."

I relaxed and he flowed into me. Then I was borne away and I understood.

16. Mt. Fuji from Umezawa

Fuji across lava fields and wisps of fog, drifting clouds; birds on the wing and birds on the ground. This one at least is close. I lean on my staff and stare at his peaceful reaches across the chaos. The lesson is like that of a piece of music: I am strengthened in some fashion I cannot describe.

And I had seen blossoming cherry trees on the way over here, and fields purple with clover, cultivated fields yellow with rape-blossoms, grown for its oil, a few winter camellias still holding forth their reds and pinks, the green shoots of rice beds, here and there a tulip tree dashed with white, blue mountains in the distance, foggy river valleys. I had passed villages where colored sheet metal now covers the roofs' thatching—blue and yellow, green, black, red—and yards filled with the slate-blue rocks so fine for landscape gardening; an occasional cow, munching, lowing softly; scar-like rows of plastic-covered mulberry bushes where the silkworms are bred. My heart jogged at the sights—the tiles, the little bridges, the color. . . . It was like entering a tale by Lafcadio Hearn, to have come back.

My mind was drawn back along the path I had followed, to the points of its intersection with my electronic bane. Hokusai's warning that night I drank too much—that his prints may trap me—could well be correct. Kit had anticipated my passage a number of times. How could he have?

Then it struck me. My little book of Hokusai's prints—a small cloth-bound volume by the Charles E. Tuttle Company—had been a present from Kit.

It is possible that he was expecting me in Japan at about this time,

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because of Osaka. Once his epigons had spotted me a couple of times, probably in a massive scanning of terminals, could he have correlated my movements with the sequence of the prints in *Hokusai's Views of Mt. Fuji*, for which he knew my great fondness, and simply extrapolated and waited? I've a strong feeling that the answer is in the affirmative.

Entering the data-net with Kit was an overwhelming experience. That my consciousness spread and flowed I do not deny. That I was many places simultaneously, that I rode currents I did not at first understand, that knowledge and transcendence and a kind of glory were all about me and within me was also a fact of peculiar perception. The speed with which I was borne seemed instantaneous, and this was a taste of eternity. The access to multitudes of terminals and enormous memory banks seemed a measure of omniscience. The possibility of the manipulation of whatever I would change within this realm and its consequences at that place where I still felt my distant body seemed a version of omnipotence. And the feeling . . . I tasted the sweetness, Kit with me and within me. It was self surrendered and recovered in a new incarnation, it was freedom from mundane desire, liberation . . .

"Stay with me here forever," Kit seemed to say.

"No," I seemed to answer, dreamlike, finding myself changing even further. "I cannot surrender myself so willingly."

"Not for this? For unity and the flow of connecting energy?"

"And this wonderful lack of responsibility?"

"Responsibility? For what? This is pure existence. There is no past."

"Then conscience vanishes."

"What do you need it for? There is no future either."

"Then all actions lose their meaning."

"True. Action is an illusion. Consequence is an illusion."

"And paradox triumphs over reason."

"There is no paradox. All is reconciled."

"Then meaning dies."

"Being is the only meaning."

"Are you certain?"

"Feel it!"

"I do. But it is not enough. Send me back before I am changed into something I do not wish to be."

"What more could you desire than this?"

"My imagination will die, also. I can feel it."

"And what is imagination?"

"A thing born of feeling and reason."

"Does this not feel right?"

"Yes, it feels right. But I do not want that feeling unaccompanied.

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When I touch feeling with reason I see that it is sometimes but an excuse for failing to close with complexity."

"You can deal with any complexity here. Behold the data! Does reason not show you that this condition is far superior to that you knew but moments ago?"

"Nor can I trust reason unaccompanied. Reason without feeling has led humanity to enact monstrosities. Do not attempt to disassemble my imagination this way."

"You retain your reason and your feelings!"

"But they are coming unplugged—with this storm of bliss, this shower of data. I need them conjoined, else my imagination is lost."

"Let it be lost then. It has served its purpose. Be done with it now. What can you imagine that you do not already have here?"

"I cannot yet know, and that is its power. If there be a will with a spark of divinity to it, I know it only through my imagination. I can give you anything else but that I will not surrender."

"And that is all? A wisp of possibility?"

"No. But it alone is too much to deny."

"And my love for you?"

"You no longer love in the human way. Let me go back."

"Of course. You will think about it. You will return."

"Back! Now!"

I pushed the helmet from my head and rose quickly. I returned to the bathroom, then to my bed. I slept as if drugged, for a long while.

Would I have felt differently about possibilities, the future, imagination, had I not been pregnant—a thing I had suspected but not yet mentioned to him, and which he had missed learning with his attention focussed upon our argument? I like to think that my answers would have been the same, but I will never know. My condition was confirmed by a local doctor the following day. I made the visit I had been putting off because my life required a certainty of something then—a certainty of anything. The screen in the work area remained blank for three days.

I read and I meditated. Then of an evening the light came on again:

ARE YOU READY?

I activated the keyboard. I typed one word:

NO.

I disconnected the induction couch and its helmet then. I unplugged the unit itself, also.

The telephone rang.

"Hello?" I said.

"Why not?" he asked me.

I screamed and hung up. He had penetrated the phone circuits, appropriated a voice.

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It rang again. I answered again.

"You will never know rest until you come to me," he said.

"I will if you will leave me alone," I told him.

"I cannot. You are special to me. I want you with me. I love you."

I hung up. It rang again. I tore the phone from the wall.

I had known that I would have to leave soon. I was overwhelmed and depressed by all the reminders of our life together. I packed quickly and I departed. I took a room at a hotel. As soon as I was settled into it the telephone rang and it was Kit again. My registration had gone into a computer and . . .

I had them disconnect my phone at the switchboard. I put out a DO NOT DISTURB sign. In the morning I saw a telegram protruding from beneath the door. From Kit. He wanted to talk to me.

I determined to go far away. To leave the country, to return to the States.

It was easy for him to follow me. We leave electronic tracks almost everywhere. By cable, satellite, optic fiber he could be wherever he chose. Like an unwanted suitor now he pestered me with calls, interrupted television shows to flash messages upon the screen, broke in on my own calls, to friends, lawyers, realtors, stores. Several times, horribly, he even sent me flowers. My electric bodhisattva, my hound of heaven, would give me no rest. It is a terrible thing to be married to a persistent datanet.

So I settled in the country. I would have nothing in my home whereby he could reach me. I studied ways of avoiding the system, of slipping past his many senses.

On those few occasions when I was careless he reached for me again immediately. Only he had learned a new trick, and I became convinced that he had developed it for the purpose of taking me into his world by force. He could build up a charge at a terminal, mold it into something like ball lightning and animal-like, and send that short-lived artifact a little distance to do his will. I learned its weakness, though, in a friend's home when one came for me, shocked me and attempted to propel me into the vicinity of the terminal, presumably for purposes of translation. I struck at the epigon—as Kit later referred to it in a telegram of explanation and apology—with the nearest object to hand—a lighted table lamp, which entered its field and blew a circuit immediately. The epigon was destroyed, which is how I discovered that a slight electrical disruption created an instability within the things.

I stayed in the country and raised my daughter. I read and I practiced my martial arts and I walked in the woods and climbed mountains and sailed and camped: rural occupations all, and very satisfying to me after

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a life of intrigue, conflict, plot and counterplot, violence, and then that small, temporary island of security with Kit. I was happy with my choice.

Fuji across the lava beds . . . Springtime . . . Now I am returned. This was not my choice.

17. Mt. Fuji from Lake Suwa

And so I come to Lake Suwa, Fuji resting small in the evening distance. It is no Kamaguchi of powerful reflections for me. But it is serene, which joins my mood in a kind of peace. I have taken the life of the spring into me now and it has spread through my being. Who would disrupt this world, laying unwanted forms upon it? Seal your lips.

Was it not in a quiet province where Bōtchan found his maturity? I've a theory concerning books like that one of Natsume Soseki's. Someone once told me that this is the one book you can be sure that every educated Japanese has read. So I read it. In the States I was told that *Huckleberry Finn* was the one book you could be sure that every educated Yankee had read. So I read it. In Canada it was Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town.* In France it was *Le Grand Meaulnes.* Other countries have their books of this sort. They are all of them pastorals, having in common a closeness to the countryside and the forces of nature in days just before heavy urbanization and mechanization. These things are on the horizon and advancing, but they only serve to add the spice of poignancy to the taste of simpler values. They are youthful books, of national heart and character, and they deal with the passing of innocence. I have given many of them to Kendra.

I lied to Boris. Of course I know all about the Osaka Conference. I was even approached by one of my former employers to do something along the lines Boris had guessed at. I declined. My plans are my own. There would have been a conflict.

Hokusai, ghost and mentor, you understand chance and purpose better than Kit. You know that human order must color our transactions with the universe, and that this is not only necessary but good, and that the light still comes through.

Upon this rise above the water's side I withdraw my hidden blade and hone it once again. The sun falls away from my piece of the world, but the darkness, too, is here my friend.

18. Mt. Fuji from the Offing in Kanagawa

And so the image of death. The Big Wave, curling above, toppling

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upon, about to engulf the fragile vessels. The one print of Hokusai's that everyone knows.

I am no surfer. I do not seek the perfect wave. I will simply remain here upon the shore and watch the water. It is enough of a reminder. My pilgrimage winds down, though the end is not yet in sight.

Well . . . I see Fuji. Call Fuji the end. As with the barrel's hoop of the first print, the circle closes about him.

On my way to this place I halted in a small glade I came upon and bathed myself in a stream which ran through it. There I used the local wood to construct a low altar. Cleansing my hands each step of the way I set before it incense made from camphorwood and from white sandalwood; I also placed there a bunch of fresh violets, a cup of vegetables and a cup of fresh water from the stream. Then I lit a lamp I had purchased and filled with rape-seed oil. Upon the altar I set my image of the god Kokuzo which I had brought with me from home, facing to the west where I stood. I washed again, then extended my right hand, middle finger bent to touch my thumb as I spoke the mantra for invoking Kokuzo. I drank some of the water. I lustrated myself with sprinklings of it and continued repetition of the mantra. Thereafter, I made the gesture of Kokuzo three times, hand to the crown of my head, to my right shoulder, left shoulder, heart and throat. I removed the white cloth in which Kokuzo's picture had been wrapped. When I had sealed the area with the proper repetitions, I meditated in the same position as Kokuzo in the picture and invoked him. After a time the mantra ran by itself, over and over.

Finally, there was a vision, and I spoke, telling all that had happened, all that I intended to do and asking for strength and guidance. Suddenly, I saw his sword descending, descending like slow lightning, to sever a limb from a tree which began to bleed. And then it was raining, both within the vision and upon me, and I knew that that was all to be had on the matter.

I wound things up, cleaned up, donned my poncho and headed on my way.

The rain was heavy, my boots grew muddy and the temperature dropped. I trudged on for a long while and the cold crept into my bones. My toes and fingers became numb.

I kept constant lookout for a shelter, but did not spot anyplace where I could take refuge from the storm. Later, it changed from a downpour to a drizzle to a weak, mist-like fall when I saw what could be a temple or shrine in the distance. I headed for it, hoping for some hot tea, a fire and a chance to change my socks and clean my boots.

A priest stopped me at the gate. I told him my situation and he looked uncomfortable.

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"It is our custom to give shelter to anyone," he said. "But there is a problem."

"I will be happy to make a cash donation," I said, "if too many others have passed this way and reduced your stores. I really just wanted to get warm."

"Oh no, it is not a matter of supplies," he told me, "and for that matter very few have been by here recently. The problem is of a different sort and it embarasses me to state it. It makes us sound old-fashioned and superstitious, when actually this is a very modern temple. But recently we have been—ah—haunted."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Bestial apparitions have been coming and going from the library and record room beside the head priest's quarters. They stalk the shrine, pass through our rooms, pace the grounds then return to the library or else fade away."

He studied my face, as if seeking derision, belief, disbelief—anything. I merely nodded.

"It is most awkward," he added. "A few simple exorcisms have been attempted but to no avail."

"For how long has this been going on?" I asked.

"For about three days," he replied.

"Has anyone been harmed by them?"

"No. They are very intimidating, but no one has been injured. They are distracting, too, when one is trying to sleep—that is, to meditate—for they produce a tingling feeling and sometimes cause the hair to rise up."

"Interesting," I said. "Are there many of them?"

"It varies. Usually just one. Sometimes two. Occasionally three."

"Does your library by any chance contain a computer terminal?"

"Yes, it does," he answered. "As I said, we are very modern. We keep our records with it, and we can obtain printouts of sacred texts we do not have on hand—and other things."

"If you will shut the terminal down for a day they will probably go away," I told him, "and I do not believe they will return."

"I would have to check with my superior before doing a thing like that. You know something of these matters?"

"Yes, and in the meantime I would still like to warm myself, if I may."

"Very well. Come this way."

I followed him, cleaning my boots and removing them before entering. He led me around to the rear and into an attractive room which looked upon the temple's garden.

"I will go and see that a meal is prepared for you, and a brazier of charcoal that you may warm yourself," he said as he excused himself.

Left by myself I admired the golden carp drifting in a pond only a few

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feet away, its surface occasionally punctuated by raindrops, and a little stone bridge which crossed the pond, a stone pagoda, paths wandering among stones and shrubs. I wanted to cross that bridge—how unlike that metal span, thrusting, cold and dark!—and lose myself there for an age or two. Instead, I sat down and gratefully gulped the tea which arrived moments later, and I warmed my feet and dried my socks in the heat of the brazier which came a little while after that.

Later, I was halfway through a meal and enjoying a conversation with the young priest, who had been asked to keep me company until the head priest could come by and personally welcome me, when I saw my first epigon of the day.

It resembled a very small, triple-trunked elephant walking upright along one of the twisting garden paths, sweeping the air to either side of the trail with those snake-like appendages. It had not yet spotted me.

I called it to the attention of the priest, who was not faced in that direction.

"Oh my!" he said, fingering his prayer beads.

While he was looking that way I shifted my staff into a readily available position beside me.

As it drifted nearer I hurried to finish my rice and vegetables. I was afraid my bowl might be upset in the skirmish soon to come.

The priest glanced back when he heard the movement of the staff along the flagstones.

"You will not need that," he said. "As I explained, these demons are not aggressive."

I shook my head as I swallowed another mouthful.

"This one will attack," I said, "when it becomes aware of my presence. You see, I am the one it is seeking."

"Oh my!" he repeated.

I stood then as its trunks swayed in my direction and it approached the bridge.

"This one is more solid than usual," I commented. "Three days, eh?"

"Yes."

I moved about the tray and took a step forward. Suddenly, it was over the bridge and rushing toward me. I met it with a straight thrust which it avoided. I spun the staff twice and struck again as it was turning. My blow landed and I was hit by two of the trunks simultaneously—once on the breast, once on the cheek. The epigon went out like a burnt hydrogen balloon and I stood there rubbing my face, looking about me the while.

Another slithered into our room from within the temple. I lunged suddenly and caught it on the first stroke.

"I think perhaps I should be leaving now," I stated. "Thank you for your hospitality. Convey my regrets to the head priest that I did not get

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to meet him. I am warm and fed and I have learned what I wanted to know about your demons. Do not even bother about the terminal. They will probably cease to visit you shortly, and they should not return."

"You are certain?"

"I know them."

"I did not know the terminals were haunted. The salesman did not tell us."

"Yours should be all right now."

He saw me to the gate.

"Thank you for the exorcism," he said.

"Thanks for the meal. Good-bye."

I traveled for several hours before I found a place to camp in a shallow cave, using my poncho as a rain-screen.

And today I came here to watch for the wave of death. Not yet, though. No truly big ones in this sea. Mine is still out there, somewhere.

19. Mt. Fuji from Shichirigahama

Fuji past pine trees, through shadow, clouds rising beside him . . . It is getting on into the evening of things. The weather was good today, my health stable.

I met two monks upon the road yesterday and I traveled with them for a time. I was certain that I had seen them somewhere else along the way, so I greeted them and asked if this were possible. They said that they were on a pilgrimage of their own, to a distant shrine, and they admitted that I looked familiar, also. We took our lunch together at the side of the road. Our conversation was restricted to generalities, though they did ask me whether I had heard of the haunted shrine in Kanagawa. How quickly such news travels. I said that I had and we reflected upon its strangeness.

After a time I became annoyed. Every turning of the way that I took seemed a part of their route, also. While I'd welcomed a little company I'd no desire for long-term companions, and it seemed their choices of ways approximated mine too closely. Finally, when we came to a split in the road I asked them which fork they were taking. They hesitated, then said that they were going right. I took the left hand path. A little later they caught up with me. They had changed their minds, they said.

When we reached the next town I offered a man in a car a good sum of money to drive me to the next village. He accepted, and we drove away and left them standing there.

I got out before we reached the next town, paid him and watched him drive off. Then I struck out upon a footpath I had seen, going in the

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general direction I desired. At one point I left the trail and cut through the woods until I struck another path.

I camped far off the trail when I finally bedded down, and the following morning I took pains to erase all sign of my presence there. The monks did not reappear. They may have been quite harmless, or their designs quite different, but I must be true to my carefully cultivated paranoia.

Which leads me to note that man in the distance—a Westerner, I'd judge, by his garments. . . . He has been hanging around taking pictures for some time. I will lose him shortly, of course, if he is following me—or even if he isn't.

It is terrible to have to be this way for too long a period of time. Next I will be suspecting schoolchildren.

I watch Fuji as the shadows lengthen. I will continue to watch until the first star appears. Then I will slip away.

And so I see the sky darken. The photographer finally stows his gear and departs.

I remain alert, but when I see the first star I join the shadows and fade like the day.

20. Mt. Fuji from Inume Pass

Through fog and above it. It rained a bit earlier. And there is Fuji, storm clouds above his brow. In many ways I am surprised to have made it this far. This view, though, makes everything worthwhile.

I sit upon a mossy rock and record in my mind the changing complexion of Fuji as a quick rain veils his countenance, ceases, begins again.

The winds are strong here. The fogbank raises ghostly limbs and lowers them. There is a kind of numb silence beneath the wind's monotone mantra.

I make myself comfortable, eating, drinking, viewing, as I go over my final plans once again. Things wind down. Soon the circle will be closed.

I had thought of throwing away my medicine here as an act of bravado, as a sign of full commitment. I see this now as a foolishly romantic gesture. I am going to need all of my strength, all of the help I can get, if I am to have a chance at succeeding. Instead of discarding the medicine here I take some.

The winds feel good upon me. They come on like waves, but they are bracing.

A few travelers pass below. I draw back, out of their line of sight. Harmless, they go by like ghosts, their words carried off by the wind, not even reaching this far. I feel a small desire to sing but I restrain myself.

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I sit for a long while, lost in a reverie of the elements. It has been good, this journey into the past, living at the edge once again. . . .

Below me. Another vaguely familiar figure comes into view, lugging equipment. I cannot distinguish features from here, nor need I. As he halts and begins to set up his gear I know that it is the photographer of Shichirigahama, out to capture another view of Fuji more permanent than any I desire.

I watch him for a time and he does not even glance my way. Soon I will be gone again, without his knowledge. I will allow this one as a coincidence. Provisionally, of course. If I see him again I may have to kill him. I will be too near my goal to permit even the possibility of interference to exist.

I had better depart now, for I would rather travel before than behind him.

Fuji-from-on-high, this was a good resting place. We will see you again soon.

Come, Hokusai, let us be gone.

21. Mt. Fuji from the Tōtōmi Mountains

Gone the old sawyers, splitting boards from a beam, shaping them. Only Fuji, of snow and clouds, remains. The men in the print work in the old way, like the Owari barrel-maker. Yet, apart from those of the fishermen who merely draw their needs from nature, these are the only two prints in my book depicting people actively shaping something in their world. Their labors are too traditional for me to see the image of the Virgin and the Dynamo within them. They could have been performing the same work a thousand years before Hokusai.

Yet it is a scene of humanity shaping the world, and so it leads me down trails of years to this time, this day of sophisticated tools and large-scale changes. I see within it the image of what was later wrought, of the metal skin and pulsing flows the world would come to wear. And Kit is there, too, god-like, riding electronic waves.

Troubling. Yet bespeaking an ancient resilience, as if this, too, is but an eyeblink glimpse of humanity's movement in time, and whether I win or lose, the raw stuff remains and will triumph ultimately over any obstacle. I would really like to believe this, but I must leave certainty to politicians and preachers. My way is laid out and invested with my vision of what must be done.

I have not seen the photographer again, though I caught sight of the monks yesterday, camped on the side of a distant hill. I inspected them with my telescope and they were the same ones with whom I had traveled

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briefly. They had not noticed me and I passed them by way of a covering detour. Our trails have not crossed since.

Fuji, I have taken twenty-one of your aspects within me now. Live a little, die a little. Tell the gods, if you think of it, that a world is about to die.

I hike on, camping early in a field close to a monastery. I do not wish to enter there after my last experience in a modern holy place. I bed down in a concealed spot nearby, amid rocks and pine tree shoots. Sleep comes easily, lasts till some odd hour.

I am awake suddenly and trembling, in darkness and stillness. I cannot recall a sound from without or a troubling dream from within. Yet I am afraid, even to move. I breathe carefully and wait.

Drifting, like a lotus on a pond, it has come up beside me, towers above me, wears stars like a crown, glows with its own milky, supernal light. It is a delicate-featured image of a bodhisattva, not unlike Kwannon, in garments woven of moonbeams.

"Mari."

Its voice is soft and caressing.

"Yes?" I answer.

"You have returned to travel in Japan. You are coming to me, are you not?"

The illusion is broken. It is Kit. He has carefully sculpted this epigon-form and wears it himself to visit me. There must be a terminal in the monastery. Will he try to force me?

"I was on my way to see you, yes," I manage.

"You may join me now, if you would."

He extends a wonderfully formed hand, as in benediction.

"I've a few small matters I must clear up before we are reunited."

"What could be more important? I have seen the medical reports. I know the condition of your body. It would be tragic if you were to die upon the road, this close to your exaltation. Come now."

"You have waited this long, and time means little to you."

"It is you that I am concerned with."

"I assure you I shall take every precaution. In the meantime, there is something which has been troubling me."

"Tell me."

"Last year there was a revolution in Saudi Arabia. It seemed to promise well for the Saudis but it also threatened Japan's oil supply. Suddenly the new government began to look very bad on paper, and a new counter-revolutionary group looked stronger and better-tempered than it actually was. Major powers intervened successfully on the side of the counter-revolutionaries. Now they are in power and they seem even worse than the first government which had been overthrown. It seems possible,

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though incomprehensible to most, that computer readouts all over the world were somehow made to be misleading. And now the Osaka Conference is to be held to work out new oil agreements with the latest regime. It looks as if Japan will get a very good deal out of it. You once told me that you are above such mundane matters, but I wonder? You are Japanese, you loved your country. Could you have intervened in this?"

"What if I did? It is such a small matter in the light of eternal values. If there is a touch of sentiment for such things remaining within me, it is not dishonorable that I favor my country and my people."

"And if you did it in this might you not be moved to intervene again one day, in some other matter where habit or sentiment tell you you should?"

"What of it?" he replies. "I but extend my finger and stir the dust of illusion a bit. If anything, it frees me even further."

"I see," I answer.

"I doubt that you do, but you will when you have joined me. Why not do it now?"

"Soon," I say. "Let me settle my affairs."

"I will give you a few more days," he says, "and then you must be with me forever."

I bow my head.

"I will see you again soon," I tell him.

"Good night, my love."

"Good night."

He drifts away then, his feet not touching the ground, and he passes through the wall of the monastery.

I reach for my medicine and my brandy. A double-dose of each . . .

22. Mt. Fuji from the Sumida River in Edo

And so I come to the place of crossing. The print shows a ferryman bearing a number of people across the river into the city and evening. Fuji lies dark and brooding in the farthest distance. Here I do think of Charon, but the thought is not so unwelcome as it once might have been. I take the bridge myself, though.

As Kit has promised me a little grace, I walk freely the bright streets, to smell the smells and hear the noises and watch the people going their ways. I wonder what Hokusai would have done in contemporary times? He is silent on the matter.

I drink a little, I smile occasionally, I even eat a good meal. I am tired of reliving my life. I seek no consolations of philosophy or literature. Let

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me merely walk in the city tonight, running my shadow over faces and storefronts, bars and theaters, temples and offices. Anything which approaches is welcome tonight. I eat *sushi*, I gamble, I dance. There is no yesterday, there is no tomorrow for me now. When a man places his hand upon my shoulder and smiles, I move it to my breast and laugh. He is good for an hour's exercise and laughter in a small room he finds us. I make him cry out several times before I leave him, though he pleads with me to stay. Too much to do and see, love. A greeting and a farewell.

Walking. . . . Through parks, alleys, gardens, plazas. Crossing. . . . Small bridges and larger ones, streets and walkways. Bark, dog. Shout, child. Weep, woman. I come and go among you. I feel you with a dispassionate passion. I take all of you inside me that I may hold the world here, for a night.

I walk in a light rain and in its cool aftermath. My garments are damp, then dry again. I visit a temple. I pay a taximan to drive me about the town. I eat a late meal. I visit another bar. I come upon a deserted playground where I swing and watch the stars.

And I stand before a fountain splaying its waters into the lightening sky, until the stars are gone and only their lost sparkling falls about me.

Then breakfast and a long sleep, another breakfast and a longer one . . .

And you, my father, there on the sad height? I must leave you soon, Hokusai.

23. Mt. Fuji from Edo

Walking again, within a cloudy evening. How long has it been, since I spoke with Kit? Too long, I am sure. An epigon could come bounding my way at any moment.

I have narrowed my search to three temples—none of them the one in the print, to be sure, only that uppermost portion of it viewed from that impossible angle, Fuji back past its peak, smoke, clouds, fog between—but I've a feeling one of these three will do in the blue of evening.

I have passed all of them many times, like a circling bird. I am loath to do more than this, for I feel the right choice will soon be made for me. I became aware sometime back that I was being followed; really followed this time, on my rounds. It seems that my worst fear was not ungrounded: Kit is employing human agents as well as epigons. How he sought them and how he bound them to his service I do not care to guess. Who else would be following me at this point, to see that I keep my promise, to force me to it if necessary?

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I slow my pace. But whoever is behind me does the same. Not yet. Very well.

Fog rolls in. The echoes of my footfalls are muffled. Also those at my back. Unfortunate.

I head for the other temple. I slow again when I come into its vicinity, all of my senses extended, alert.

Nothing. No one. It is all right. Time is no problem. I move on.

After a long while I approach the precincts of the third temple. This must be it, but I require some move from my pursuer to give me the sign. Then, of course, I must deal with that person before I make my own move. I hope that it will not be too difficult, for everything will turn upon that small conflict.

I slow yet again and nothing appears but the moisture of the fog upon my face and the knuckles of my hand wrapped about my staff. I halt. I seek in my pocket after a box of cigarettes I had purchased several days ago in my festive mood. I had doubted they would shorten my life.

As I raise one to my lips I hear the words, "You desire a light, Madam?"

I nod my head as I turn.

It is one of the two monks who extends a lighter to me and flicks forth its flame. I notice for the first time the heavy ridge of callous along the edge of his hand. He had kept it carefully out of sight before, as we sojourned together. The other monk appears to his rear, to his left.

"Thank you."

I inhale and send smoke to join the fog.

"You have come a long way," the man states.

"Yes."

"And your pilgrimage has come to an end."

"Oh? Here?"

He smiles and nods. He turns his head toward the temple.

"This is our temple," he says, "where we worship the new Bodhisattva. He awaits you within."

"He can continue to wait, till I finish my cigarette," I say.

"Of course."

With a casual glance, I study the man. He is probably a very good *karateka*. I am very good with the *bo*. If it were only him I would bet on myself. But two of them, and the other probably just as good as this one? Kokuzo, where is your sword? I am suddenly afraid.

I turn away, I drop the cigarette, I spin into my attack. He is ready, of course. No matter. I land the first blow.

By then, however, the other man is circling and I must wheel and move defensively, turning, turning. If this goes on for too long they will be able to wear me down.

I hear a grunt as I connect with a shoulder. Something, anyway . . .

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Slowly, I am forced to give way, to retreat toward the temple wall. If I am driven too near it, it will interfere with my strokes. I try again to hold my ground, to land a decisive blow. . . .

Suddenly, the man to my right collapses, a dark figure on his back. No time to speculate. I turn my attention to the first monk, and moments later I land another blow, then another.

My rescuer is not doing so well, however. The second monk has shaken him off and begins striking at him with bone-crushing blows. My ally knows something of unarmed combat, though, for he gets into a defensive stance and blocks many of these, even landing a few of his own. Still, he is clearly overmatched.

Finally I sweep a leg and deliver another shoulder blow. I try three strikes at my man while he is down, but he rolls away from all of them and comes up again. I hear a sharp cry from my right, but I cannot look away from my adversary.

He comes in again and this time I catch him with a sudden reversal and crush his temple with a followup. I spin then, barely in time, for my ally lies on the ground and the second monk is upon me.

Either I am lucky or he has been injured. I catch the man quickly and follow up with a rapid series of strikes which take him down, out, and out for good.

I rush to the side of the third man and kneel beside him, panting. I had seen his gold earring as I moved about the second monk.

"Boris." I take his hand. "Why are you here?"

"I told you—I could take a few days—to help you," he says, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "Found you. Was taking pictures . . . And see . . . You needed me."

"I'm sorry," I say. "Grateful, but sorry. You're a better man than I thought."

He squeezes my hand. "I told you I liked you—Maryushka. Too bad . . . we didn't have—more time. . . ."

I lean and kiss him, getting blood on my mouth. His hand relaxes within my own. I've never been a good judge of people, except after the fact.

And so I rise. I leave him there on the wet pavement. There is nothing I can do for him. I go into the temple.

It is dark near the entrance, but there are many votive lights to the rear. I do not see anyone about. I did not think that I would. It was just to have been the two monks, ushering me to the terminal. I head toward the lights. It must be somewhere back there.

I hear rain on the rooftop as I search. There are little rooms, off to either side, behind the lights.

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It is there, in the second one. And even as I cross the threshold I feel that familiar ionization which tells me that Kit is doing something here.

I rest my staff against the wall and go nearer. I place my hand upon the humming terminal.

"Kit," I say, "I have come."

No epigon grows before me, but I feel his presence and he seems to speak to me as he did on that night so long ago when I lay back upon the couch and donned the helmet:

"I knew that you would be here tonight."

"So did I," I reply.

"All of your business is finished?"

"Most of it."

"And you are ready now to be joined with me?"

"Yes."

Again I feel that movement, almost sexual in nature, as he flows into me. In a moment he would bear me away into his kingdom.

Tatemae is what you show to others. *Honne* is your real intention. As Musashi cautioned in the Book of Waters, I try not to reveal my *honne* even at this moment. I simply reach out with my free hand and topple my staff so that its metal tip, batteries engaged, falls against the terminal.

"Mari! What have you done?" he asks, within me now, as the humming ceases.

"I have cut off your line of retreat, Kit."

"Why?"

The blade is already in my hand.

"It is the only way for us. I give you this *jigai*, my husband."

"No!"

I feel him reaching for control of my arm as I exhale. But it is too late. It is already moving. I feel the blade enter my throat, well-placed.

"Fool!" he cries. "You do not know what you have done! I cannot return!"

"I know."

As I slump against the terminal I seem to hear a roaring sound, growing, at my back. It is the Big Wave, finally come for me. My only regret is that I did not make it to the final station, unless, of course, that is what Hokusai is trying to show me, there beside the tiny window, beyond the fog and the rain and the night.

24. Mt. Fuji in a Summer Storm

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Eurydice Back in Hades

"One backward glance sufficed to see, To lose, to kill, Eurydice." (Boethius)

(For Susan Baker)

Two thousand years and more, they've felt for *him.*
I've yet to hear one single metered sob
Escape some poet when he thinks of *me.*
Of course it hurt him, and the fact that he
Did it to himself makes him an image
Of all tragedy, but please let us not
Forget the verb "to look behind" implies
Two victims; it was me he saw, you know!
I was the one drawn back into the fog
Obscuring being, melting humanness
Back to witless, bloodless, listless ghosthood.

They asked us for a simple act of faith:
Me, essential fire unclothed, to walk
Into dispersing winds of upper earth,
With nothing but shroud and him to keep me *me*;
Him, to look ahead and trust that I
Wouldn't wisp away on breath of whim,
That womanhood could be as firm as he.

I trusted, and went on; he faltered, and looked back;
The second time I died, he was the killer;
How does it happen *he* gets all the tears?
I know how: it's other *men* who weep.
Sun's son or not, he's just like other men.

Persephone saw that. I heard her say,
Just as I set out for living ground,
"He'll never manage. He'll have to turn around."

—M.L.Nelson

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

INSIDE, OUTSIDE

The SF genre, as we are sometimes wont in these pages to forget, does not exist in a literary vacuum, nor, as those within the mystic circle would seem to like to believe, are SF *modes* the exclusive literary property of so-called "SF writers." On the other hand, as the so-called mainstream critical establishment seems to have even more difficulty comprehending, not all SF produced by those who may be stereotyped as "genre writers" is necessarily "genre fiction."

Lately, meaning in the past half dozen years or so, we have been seeing quite a bit of "SF" by writers "outside the genre" and quite a bit of "crossover fiction" by so-called "genre writers" attempting to "break out" into "mainstream."

Two paragraphs into this essay, and we are already hip-deep in quotation marks and italics, signifying that the meanings of the words qualified thereby would seem to be in need of more precise technical definition than Webster's provides.

The "SF genre," most simply and commercially defined, is everything published as "SF"—books which can be and are judged, at least in the marketplace and in the mainstream literary journals, by their covers. In other words, SF is that which is called SF, packaged as SF, marketed as SF, quacks like SF, and is therefore regarded as SF as it waddles out onto the racks.

"SF genre writers" may therefore be simply defined as those writers who regularly produce the stuff shelved in the SF racks in the bookstores.

All well and good as working definitions for commercial purposes, but the *literary* situation is a good deal more complex and growing more so daily.

For no one has ever really come up with a generally acceptable *literary* definition of science fiction, and now that the logo "SF" has long since come to encompass both science fiction and fantasy, the essential nature of the beast has become even more elusive.

This is not so for the other genres of fiction. "Mysteries" are readily enough defined by their plot structures. "Contemporary fiction," "historical fiction," "Westerns," and so forth are defined by their time frames and/or their geographical settings. "Gothics" are defined by

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their ambiance, and "horror fiction" by the horror it must evoke in the reader.

But science fiction may be, and has been, set in any time, past, present, and future. Indeed, it may be and has been set even in *alternate* pasts and presents, and the same work may encompass several alternate futures. One used to be able to say that science fiction could be set anywhere in the universe, but now that cosmological physics is dealing with the possibities of multiple universes, even that limitation is no longer applicable.

Nor may science fiction be defined by characteristic plot structure, set of characters, range of themes, or evoked emotions.

Perhaps John W. Campbell, Jr. said it best when he declared that in an absolute technical sense, science fiction was the whole literary spectrum in that it was the fiction that encompassed all possibilities, past, present, and future—a fictional arena without *any* restrictions or parameters. All other fictional modes could then be readily enough defined as special cases of science fiction by referring to their temporal and spatial restrictions.

But now that the "SF genre" has come to encompass fantasy as well, SF modes are no longer even restricted to what is, was, or will be possible, assuming we ever really knew what *that* meant!

So in an absolute literary sense, SF *is* the "mainstream," though in a commercial and general critical sense "mainstream" is still regarded as the mimetic contemporary-setting novel, which is to say a special case of "SF."

So when "SF writers" talk about "breaking out" or "crossing over" into "mainstream," what they are really talking about is breaking their books out of the commercial and/or critical purdah of SF genre publication, not widening their sphere of literary possibilities.

Indeed, in a literary sense, breaking out or crossing over is generally achieved or at least attempted by adopting some or all of the *narrower restrictions* of so-called "mainstream" by setting the work in either some recognizable venue in the present or the historical past on the planet Earth or its immediate vicinity, or by setting the work in the immediate future where only a few speculative elements are unfamiliar to the general reader.

Interestingly and paradoxically enough, while "SF writers" have been attempting to break out of the genre and into the greater possibilities for commercial success and critical attention of the "mainstream," mainstream writers who have never labored under the commercial and critical restrictions suffered by the genre writers, are attempting to break out of the *literary* restrictions of mainstream modes and into the wider literary possibilities of SF.

It's not hard to see why. On the one hand, SF now offers greater

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possibilities for commercial success to "literary" writers such as Russell Hoban or Mark Helprin, for so-called "serious literary fiction," which is really to say the serious mimetic *contemporary* novel, generally sells very few copies in hardcover no matter how many rave reviews it garners from the literary establishment, and half the time has trouble even making it into paperback.

On the other hand, commercially successful and critically well-regarded writers such as Norman Mailer, Len Deighton, Doris Lessing, Anthony Burgess, and Walter Tevis are able to explore the wider literary possibilities inherent in SF modes without, for the most part, losing either sales or literary standing.

In other words, we are now in the presence of a growing body of work that is science fiction or fantasy by any reasonable literary definition, produced by writers who have developed entirely outside the "SF genre" and receiving wider attention from the critical establishment as such, at the same time that certain "SF" writers are producing at least a trickle of books attempting to "break out" of the genre.

Alas, on the one hand, the mainstream literary establishment still for the most part ignores or at best looks patronizingly down its nose at most work, SF or not, produced by writers stereotyped as "genre writers," and on the other hand generally displays its woeful and willful ignorance of half a century of SF when it attempts to deal with SF written by its darling sons and daughters.

Take for example the extravagant overpraise heaped by these literary mavens upon Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* and contrast it with the muddled misunderstanding and consequent approbrium dumped by the same on Norman Mailer's immeasurably superior *Ancient Evenings*.

Riddley Walker is set in a post-nuclear-collapse Britain, and told in the degenerated English of the period. The title character is the first-person narrator, a young man maturing into a kind of wandering story-teller, meeting the usual sorts one would expect in such stories, including mutants whom the humans both hate for their loathsomeness which reminds them of man's self-inflicted fallen state, and worship for their psychic powers.

Now as *we* all know, thematically there is absolutely nothing new in all this; it was written over and over and over again in the 1950s, it is still a staple of SF, and the greatest exemplar, the novel that any such work must be judged against, is, of course, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. No one has topped Miller's masterpiece in the decades since he wrote it, and Hoban doesn't even come close.

Nevertheless, the literary establishment creamed in their jeans over *Riddley Walker*, and hardly seemed to realize either that it was

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derivative of literally hundreds of previous works, or that Walter M. Miller had turned the same material into an enduring masterpiece which has been conspicuously in print for about a quarter of a century.

Why?

Well-first of all, to be fair about it, *Riddley Walker* is far from being a bad novel. Hoban has done a good job transmogrifying the events and lessons of the nuclear holocaust into the degenerate mythology of Riddley's future, and telling the tale in the degenerate patois of the age provides pathos, though the inconsistently-worked-out screwed-up spelling provides only a pain in the ass.

Riddley Walker is almost a textbook example of the strengths and weaknesses of the typical "literary" writer writing SF in sublime and naïve ignorance of what "genre" writers have done over half a century and more. The concentration is on character and style, at which Hoban is superior to most of the SF writers who have worked this theme (but inferior to, for example, Miller, Pangborn, or Sturgeon), and in the process of inventing the wheel again, he manages to avoid much of the stereotypical post-nuclear schtick while nevertheless dredging up deformed mutants with psychic powers as if no one had ever thought of them before.

On the other hand, even the journeyman genre writer would not perpetrate some of the howlers that Hoban has committed when it comes to the details of his future society. Here, for example, we have isolated British villagers at a very low technological level forever drinking tea and rolling hash in "rizlas." Hoban would seem to have never considered that the tea and hashish would have to be imported from great distances, and that in such a society, paper would be far too rare and expensive to use in rolling joints. For that matter, I defy *anyone* to roll hash not liberally mixed with tobacco (which Hoban's villagers would also be unable to grow in Britain) into a tokeable joint.

Now admittedly, even though there are numerous examples of such science fictional gaffes, this would be mere nit-picking if the same lack of extrapolative rigor (indeed, I suspect, the ignorance of the concept of extrapolative rigor itself) did not infect the creation of the central core of the novel, the invented patois in which it is told.

Hoban's transmuted and degenerated English is an entirely arbitrary creation in which words are broken into fragments and put back together again for low comic effect, in which the same phoneme may have several alternate spellings, and which all too often comes off like a baggy-pants American comedian rendering British dialects (Hoban is an American residing in Britain).

Riddley Walker is to science fiction as Grandma Moses is to sophisticated gallery painting: the creation of a talented but unschooled primitive, avoiding most

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of the obvious clichés while reinventing some of the others, fresh and different in its freedom from genre apparatus, but hardly up to the work of true masters who have done their homework.

So why the critical overpraise? Well, first of all, Hoban had something of a previous reputation as a "serious" writer and no stigma as an "SF writer," or the overpraisers in question would never have even read his book. But once they did, my guess is that they were genuinely and sincerely moved by what they genuinely and sincerely perceived as its conceptual daring.

Stanislaw Lem's reputation in the United States was made by a long feature piece on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* in which Theodore Solataroff went on and on praising his inventiveness and conceptual genius in great detail, ending up by pronouncing him "one of the deep spirits of the age," never once acknowledging or realizing that the thematic material he found so outre and revolutionary, far from springing full-blown from the brow of Stanislaw Lem, was simply the common material of middle-of-the-road SF!

In other words, while establishment literary critics may be prejudiced against "genre SF," it is usually an *ignorant* prejudice. They simply haven't read the stuff. But the better ones, while regrettably ignorant and even more regrettably biased, are not stupid or unperceptive. When they are tricked into reading and reviewing even less than masterly SF by writers against whom they have formed no prejudgement, they frequently find themselves bowled over into excess by unexpected confrontation with a mode which suddenly evokes a sense of wonder they never even knew they had.

On the other hand, this gaping blind spot in the literary education of establishment critics can sometimes work to the disadvantage of SF or fantasy works by writers of deservedly great repute in their own circles, to wit, for example, Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*.

This, as anyone at all familiar with genre fantasy instantly recognizes, is a fantasy novel set in ancient Egypt. It opens with a soul in the process of reincarnation, it proceeds to render telepathy as a fairly common given, it deals with the gods in a rather matter-of-fact manner, it has some very interesting things indeed to say about magic, and at the end, Mailer seems to be setting himself up for a sequel in a science fiction mode set in the future and in space.

Indeed, I have heard more than one SF fan complain that *Ancient Evenings* is a rip-off of Roger Zelazny's *Creatures of Light and Darkness*. While this idiocy is the equivalent of accusing anyone who has written a generation-ship story of plagiarizing Heinlein, or anyone who has written an Arthurian fantasy of ripping off Malory, it does point out that even the naïve and

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unsophisticated SF reader can easily enough perceive that *Ancient Evenings* is a *fantasy* novel.

But amazingly enough, some of the major reviews of this major novel in major critical journals entirely missed this point, and instead reviewed *Ancient Evenings* as a grossly inaccurate historical novel, taking Mailer to task for falsely portraying his ancient Egyptians as telepathic, for his twisted rendering of Egyptian mythology, for the sophisticated modernistic consciousness with which he imbued his characters, and most of all for the fascinating if unwholesome magical system he built around feces.

Which is to say that these ignoramuses flayed Mailer for some of the most imaginative *virtues* of his *fantasy* novel under the pig-headed assumption that they were dealing with failed historical re-creation!

If only *these* worthies were familiar with such Zelazny novels as *Creatures of Light and Darkness* and *Lord of Light*! For while Mailer is in no way plagiarizing Zelazny, *Ancient Evenings* is certainly best understood and appreciated as an evolution, deepening, and extension of the mode Zelazny more or less pioneered in such works.

Like Zelazny, Mailer takes a mythos and plays freely with it for his own modernistic purposes and gifts his prose and his characters with a certain contemporary sophistication of consciousness which may indeed be anachronistic in terms of historical realism. Why not? This is fantasy, metafiction, *not* mimesis, or, as Alexei Panshin has said in a somewhat different context, "SF that *knows* it is SF."

Where Mailer goes beyond Zelazny is in his employment of powers and virtues not generally characteristic of the genre, such as psycho-sexual description of which he is the master, psychological realism, and the willingness and ability to treat a superficially smart-ass concept with such puissant seriousness that in the end the reader is convinced that it is no arch conceit after all.

Which is to say that for my money, anyway, Mailer's meditations upon the powers of excrement, for which of course he has been the butt of much denigrating low humor, is in fact one of the most perceptive insights into the psychology of magic in all fantasy.

If you think not, then examine your *own* reactions to crap, which is to say the aura of taboo, fear, loathing, and yes, therefore power, exuded by the very word, let alone the substance itself! We laugh, we wrinkle our noses, we avoid the subject in polite company, but *why*?

It is precisely the courage to ask such questions, and the cold intellectual curiosity of the man from Mars necessary to try to answer them, that is perhaps the central virtue of "SF," be it science fiction or fantasy, and the reason why, in the end, a writer like Mailer must perhaps inevitably be drawn to such modes in this mature stage of his career, for in this sense at least,

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he has always been a spiritual kinsman of science fiction writers, whether he has ever been conscious of the fact or not.

But to what extent do "SF writers" carry over the virtues of SF modes into "mainstream" fiction when they attempt to "cross over" and to what extent are they able to fuse them with the virtues of accepted literary modes such as psychological realism, irony, and ambiguity?

To what extent are the esthetic virtues of SF watered down in the attempt? And finally, *are there* for the most part unexamined SF genre conventions and formulas which tend to cross over with them to the detriment of the work?

George R. R. Martin's last two novels, *Fevre Dream* and *The Armageddon Rag*, have both been forthright attempts to "break out" into the mainstream, at least in terms of sales, albeit of two entirely different sorts.

Fevre Dream, a vampire novel set in the 19th century on the Mississippi, can be taken as a fantasy novel, or just as easily as a science fiction novel set in the past, since Martin has taken care to work out a very good scientific rationale and set of parameters for vampirism which are even integral to the plot. This one is simply a fine SF novel set in the past which happens to have been packaged and marketed to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. As "SF" in a literary sense, it is entirely successful. Whether it succeeded as a "break out" into mainstream is strictly a matter of whether the marketing strategy succeeded in increasing sales to the extent that the publisher hoped.

The Armageddon Rag, on the other hand, is something else again, a *very* ambitious novel indeed in a literary and even social sense, that paradoxically enough was packaged and marketed as "mainstream," yet severely diminished as a literary achievement by a thematically counterproductive "fantasy element" unnecessarily dragged in by the heels.

Novelist and former underground journalist Sandy Blair is launched into a journey into his and our past when he is talked into investigating the brutal murder of the former manager of the Nazgul, an apocalyptic rock group whose lead singer was murdered on stage at a large rock festival, an event which Martin uses as his metasymbol for the death of the Sixties and all that it has meant in his and our lives.

For perhaps the first half of the novel or so, *The Armageddon Rag* is the best fictional exploration of what the spirit of the Sixties was and what its death has meant to contemporary America that has yet managed to escape from limbo into print, as Blair travels around the country meeting old friends and acquaintances from that era and as Martin uses this device to take us back and forth in time.

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I say *escaped from limbo into print* because there has, for many years, been a taboo against publishing anything that tells the truth about the Sixties, as the first half of *The Armageddon Rag* does so well. One may wax sadly nostalgic about lost youth from the point of view of aging ex-hippies in the present, one may publish thrillers set in a Sixties timeframe, one may even write about the Viet Nam war up to a point if one is circumspect enough, but one may *not* publish a novel directly about the counterculture of the 1960s that deals sympathetically with the vanished spirit thereof. I have come upon any number of unpublished novels in this vein by published writers. Upon attempting to get a contract for such a novel myself, I have been told by publishing executives and agents in words of one syllable that such a thing, no matter how well done, is unpublishable. And if you think I am just being paranoid, then try to name such a published novel yourself.

The point is that Martin either had the sad street smarts to know this on some level himself, or was told so by his editor, for even though *The Armaggedon Rag* was marketed as a mainstream novel and literarily speaking would have been better as such, a deal with the devil schtick is made the McGuffin of the novel, a literarily unnecessary piece of genre apparatus which destroys its thematic resolution.

Even though (indeed perhaps *because*) Martin paints such an achingly true portrait of the lost idealism of the Sixties, he has evil forces doing black magic in an attempt to resurrect the *negative* aspects of the 1960s by resurrecting the Nazgul and the murdered lead singer, so that he can be murdered again, in order to bring on the Armageddon of the title. Blair, who is being set up to be the murderer, thwarts this scheme in the end by refusing to do the deed.

Thematically, of course, in terms of what Martin has so admirably set up, this cannot make any sense. If the idealistic Sixties were more golden than the de-energized present, then resurrecting them cannot be a demonic act, and preventing that resurrection is morally wrong. In order to finesse this plot flaw, Martin makes the Nazgul stand for the spirit of Altamont rather than of Woodstock. But this doesn't work either in terms of the rest of the novel, which speaks another tale obviously closer to the author's heart, for when Blair prevents "Armageddon," what he and we, alas, are left with, is what the novel began with, the death of the dream.

Alas, poor Martin was caught between a rock and a hard place. The whole esthetic and spirit of the book led towards an apotheois in which the spirit of the Sixties was resurrected, but there was no way this could be credibly done in terms of the contemporary-cum-historical mode, and even if by some act of genius he *had* found it, it would

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only have rendered the novel unpublishable!

In hindsight, perhaps, he might just have pulled it off by using a *different* genre convention and turned the book into an alternate world novel, so that when Blair refrains from murder, he and we find ourselves not where we are now, but where we might have been.

But if he had pulled that off, would *The Armageddon Rag* have been published at all? Or would he and we be left with one more unpublished novel instead of this noble and heroic effort which was prevented from being entirely satisfying by the very genre ploy which allowed it to see the light of day in the first place?

Michael Moorcock's *Byzantium Endures*, on the other hand, is an historical novel entirely free from even a hint of genre conventions. This is hardly surprising, since Moorcock, as editor and as writer has been more committed than anyone else to freeing the literary modes of SF from the conventions of the SF genre. And yet, somehow, certain vigors and strengths of SF modes do seem to have insinuated themselves into this work. And this is not so surprising either, since Moorcock has also long been dedicated to breathing fresh air into the stale drawing rooms of the "literary" novel.

Byzantium Endures is the first volume of a trilogy (which may turn into a tetralogy) which will take its protagonist and narrator, Dimitri Pyanitski, from his birth in Kiev in 1900, clear through the Russian Revolution, both World Wars, and the Holocaust of the concentration camps into the present or immediate future, where he has already made cameo appearances in Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius cycle, which *is* fiction in an SF mode.

A Ukranian Jew and an anti-Semite, an inventor, a cocaine addict, and something of a con artist, the protean and disreputable Dimitri is designed as nothing less than a literary vehicle through whose sensibility Moorcock is attempting to render, explore, and perhaps even make some sense out of, the entire history of Europe in the twentieth century. *Byzantium Endures* takes him through the Russian Revolution and into the beginnings of the Stalinist aftermath, and leaves him fleeing Russia for a future of horrors of which he is as yet unmindful but which *we* can anticipate all too well.

In another context, I once observed that "mainstream literary writers" tend to bring to bear great erudition, psychological depth, and writing skill to the detailed examination of the lint in their navels, whereas SF writers are unafraid to tackle great themes of cosmic import, with, alas, naïve triviality of treatment.

Here, however, Moorcock is bent upon taking on not one but virtually *all* of the great literary themes of the twentieth century! It is in this cosmic chutzpah that this work partakes of one of the

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central virtues of SF. But the first volume of this projected masterwork, at least, far from playing trivially with enormities, re-creates the world of early twentieth century Russia and the Ukraine not only with daunting detail and political sophistication, but with a psychological depth and stylistic inventiveness that any so-called "literary writer" must envy, and with a mordant sense of humor to boot.

Byzantium Endures is not "SF" by any stretch of the imagination, and yet somehow, it is difficult to imagine any writer taking on such a task as Moorcock has herein embarked upon without a certain indefinable something that can only come from familiarity with SF modes. For this is nothing less than an attempt to write a completely rounded cycle of novels, psychological, historical, and political, which will encompass the twentieth century itself. And no one can hope to encompass both the inner and outer history of the century without absorbing the esthetic of "SF."

When, however, an SF writer attempts to encompass the esthetics of modern literary theory and apply them to what is unequivocally a science fiction novel, we get something like Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand.*

This novel defies esthetically just description. A plot summary makes it sound quite asinine. In a galactic far future, perhaps as part of a geopolitical ploy, "Industrial Diplomat" Marq Dyeth is presented with Rat Korga, a former slave raised to higher consciousness by implants and the sole survivor of his destroyed home world. Korga and Dyeth have been matched as mutual "ideal sex objects" by computer. They meet on Dyeth's home world and have terrific sex together. But there are so many groupies bugging them that Korga leaves. Plot-wise, th-th-th-that's all, folks!

Obviously, this cannot really be what this whole long novel is about, especially since Delany neither gives their relationship an extra-sexual depth, nor really describes the nature of their perfect sexual compatibility in convincing detail.

What the novel may really be all about in social terms (Delany himself calls it a "novel of manners") is the conflict between two galactic cultures, the Family and the Sygn. The Family, simply put, believes in maintaining a culturally consistent human norm, keeping humanity human, as it were. The Sygn believes in the merger and intermingling of human and alien cultures on the deepest levels.

On Dyeth's home world, human and alien cultures have fused to the point where extended families combine both races, where the humans have adopted alien artforms, esthetics, morality, dining rituals, and sexual modes, and where even interspecies sex is common.

Since most of the novel is told from Dyeth's point of view, we are

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drawn into perceiving all of this as quite normal, positive, liberated, and healthy. Only at the end, when an off-world human family which has long existed on intimate and friendly terms with Dyeth's abruptly switches from the Sygn to the Family for apparently purely self-interested pragmatic reasons, do we suddenly get characters delivering vitriolic diatribes against what we have come to accept as a benign human-alien cultural fusion.

Still, this background, when combined with the minimal storyline, would seem to be only enough material for a short story or at best a novelette, rather than this big fat novel. Clearly, in terms of genre conventions, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* would have to be rated a hugely-padded failure.

And yet the book *does* keep you reading along, even though in genre terms, nothing much is really happening. Clearly then, what we have here is an SF novel by an "SF writer" which defies genre conventions and expectations.

Since in conventional genre terms, most of the novel is padding, perhaps it is precisely the padding, or in more high-falutin' terms, the *discursiveness*, which should be taken as the focus, for along the way, Delany uses the book as a vehicle for presenting any number of artistic and esthetic theories, epitomized by a long tour-de-force sequence in which the electronically enhanced Korga "reads" centuries worth of galactic literature in a few minutes and in which Delany manages to convey this experience and the essential content of it to the reader of *his* novel.

Padded to a fare-thee-well *Stars in My Pocket* certainly is, but it is undeniably very high-quality padding. Delany has long been known for his interest in theoretical criticism, particularly semiotics, and indeed has published whole books of the stuff, and outside the genre, this sort of highly discursive, theory-based fiction is an accepted mode for the novel, for a kind of metafiction which is about fiction and the work in question itself, rather than story, setting, or character, which serve instead as merely a kind of armature.

So perhaps, in the end, what we are left with in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* is the current ultimate example of the strange mutations now occurring when the "Family" of "literary mainstream" —or in this case of the novel based on literary theory rather than story—and the "Sygn" of SF modes engage in interspecies miscegenation.

What a long strange trip it's been!

And getting stranger still! ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

June and July bring a number of Canadian conventions, leading up to the August pre-WorldCon lull. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. When phoning, identify yourself & your reason for calling right off. Look for me at cons behind the big, iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge.

JUNE, 1985

7-9—**Hat Con.** For info, write: **108 Park Ave., Danbury CT 06810.** Or phone: **(203) 743-1872** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Danbury CT (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Ramada Inn. Guests will include: editor/publishers Ian & Betty Ballantine. Hat masquerade.

7-9—**Ad Astra.** Howard Johnson's Airport Hotel, Toronto ON. Vonda McIntyre, David Brin, M. Glyer.

14-16—**LastCon.** Americana Inn, Albany NY. C. Stasheff, Jack Gaughan, Hal Clement, Chuck Rothman.

21-23—**DeepSouthCon, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815.** Marion Zimmer Bradley, artist Barclay Shaw, Marta Randall, Bob Sampson. The big annual Southern con, at the birthplace of the US space program.

JULY, 1985

3-7—**WesterCon 38, 4812 Folsom Blvd. #125, Sacramento CA 95819. (916) 481-8753.** James P. Hogan, Katherine Kurtz, Paula Crist. The West's big annual con. The biggest masquerade outside WorldCon.

4-7—**InConJunction, Box 19776, Indianapolis IN 46219.** M. Z. Bradley, M.P. Kube-McDowell. Play & fireworks.

5-7—**EmpiriCon, Box 682, Church St. Sta., New York NY 10008.** Spider & Jeanne Robinson, P. Foglio. The leading New York City con, though the Sheraton LaGuardia isn't exactly midtown Manhattan.

12-14—**Archon, Box 50125, Clayton MO 63105.** R. A. MacAvoy, Suzette H. Elgin. Henry VIII Lodge.

12-14—**XCon, Box 7, Milwaukee WI 53201. (414) 963-4554.** No more info on this at press time.

19-21—**MapleCon, Box 3156, Stn. D, Ottawa ON K1P 6H7.** Richard & Wendy Pini, Chris Claremont, Donald Kingsbury, Hal Clement, Charles R. Saunders. A bit comics-oriented, but has a good reputation.

19-21—**OKon, Box 4229, Tulsa OK 74159.** Artist Phil Foglio, fan Ken Moore, singer Marty Burke.

26-28—**Conversion, 340 17th Av. SW, Calgary AB T2S 0A5. (403) 228-2065.** Poul Anderson, M. Reid.

26-28—**MythCon 16, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** The first time east of California. Theme: "A Kinship of Dancers: Interplay in the Lives and Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams."

AUGUST, 1985

22-26—**AussieCon Two, 11863 W. Jefferson Blvd. #1, Culver City CA 90230.** Melbourne, Australia. The WorldCon for 1985. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, editor/fan Ted White. Guests too numerous to mention.

30-Sept. 2—**ChiliCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** The N.A. Con for 1985. Costs $35 by 6/30.

AUGUST, 1986

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 2500 N. Atlanta #1986, Smyrna GA 30080. (404) 438-3943.** Atlanta GA. Ray ("Martian Chronicles") Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon.

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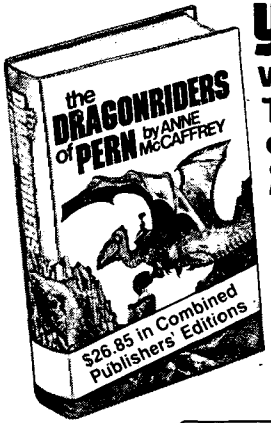

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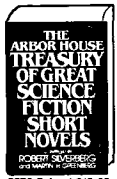

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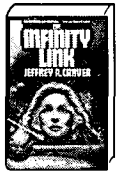

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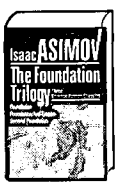

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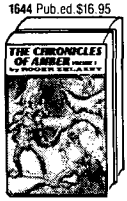

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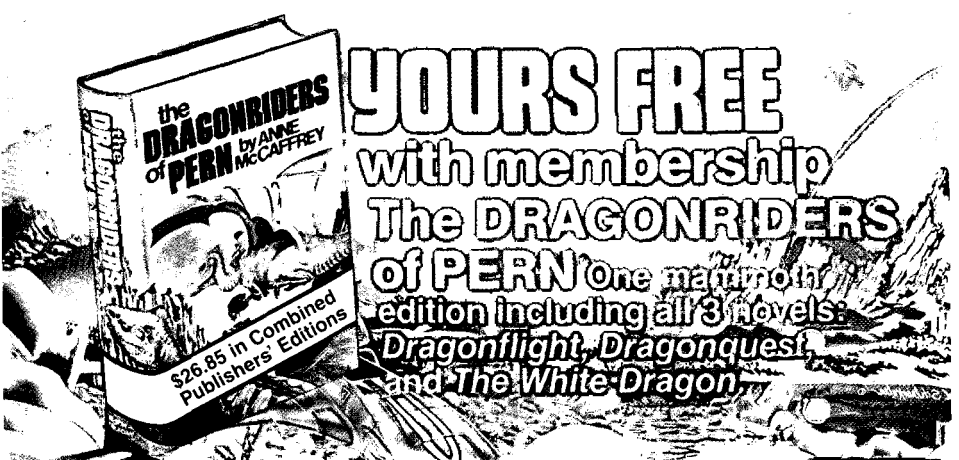

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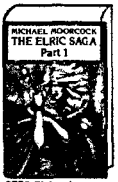

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